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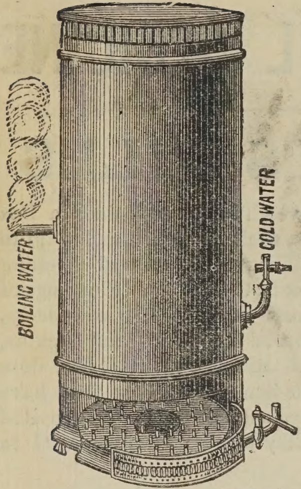

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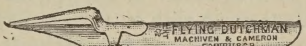

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THE

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A Novel

BY

WALTER BESANT AND JAMES RICE

AUTHORS OF

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THE MONKS OF THELEMA.

CHAPTER I.

"Here dwell no frowns nor anger; from these gates
Sorrow flies afar."

Two novices are waiting for the ceremony of reception. They have been placed side by side upon a seat at the lower end of the great hall, and have been enjoined to wait in silent meditation. The low seat perhaps typifies the stool of repentance; but until the reception is over one hardly likes to speculate on the meaning of things. One of the novices is a man, and the other a girl. Two by two the fraternity have entered into this ark; and two by two they go out of it. So much only is known to the outer world. The man is about thirty years of age, with bright eyes, and smooth-shaven chin and cheek. If the light was better, you would make out that he has a humorous twinkle in his eyes, and that his lips, which are thin, have got a trick of smiling at nothing—at the memory, the anticipation, the mere imagined umbra of a good thing. This kind of second sight is useful for keeping the spirits at a uniform temperature, a simmering rather than a bubbling of cheerfulness. The unhappy people who have it not are melancholy in solitude, rush into any kind of company, often take to drink, commit atrocious crimes while drunk, and hang themselves in prison. Mr. Roger Exton will never, it is very certain, come to this melancholy end. He is extremely thin, and rather tall; also his face is brown, of that colour which comes of long residence in hot climates. In fact Mr. Exton has but recently returned from Assam, where he has made a fortune—which we hope is a large one—some say by tea, or, according to another school of thinkers, by indigo. The question, still unsettled, belongs to those open controversies, like the authorship of

"Junius," or the identity of the "Claimant," which vex the souls of historians and tap-room orators. The only other remarkable points about this novice were that his hair was quite straight, and that, although he was yet, as I have said, not much more than thirty, the corners of his eyes were already provided with a curious and multitudinous collection of crows'-feet, the puckers, lines, spiders' webs and map-like rills of which lent his face an incongruous expression, partly of surprise, partly of humour, partly of craft and subtlety. The rapid years of modern life, though his had been spent in the quiet of the North-west Provinces, had in his case, instead of tearing the hair off temples and top, or making him prematurely grey, as happens to some shepherds, marked him in this singular fashion.

The reasons why you cannot see things as clearly as I have described them are that it is past nine o'clock on an evening in July; that the hall is lighted chiefly by upper windows which form a sort of clerestory; that most of the glass is painted; that what amber twilight of a summer evening can get in is caught in the black depths of a fifteenth-century roof, across which stretches a whole forest of timber, a marvel of intricate beams; or falls upon tapestry, carpets, and the dull canvas of portraits which swallow it all up. In the east, behind the pair who wait, is a rose window emblazoned with the arms and crest, repeated in every light, of the great House of Dunlop. Looking straight before them, the expectants could make out nothing at all except black shadows, which might mean instruments of torture. Half way up the wall there ran a row of tiny gas-jets, which had been lighted, but were now turned down to little points of blue flame, pretty to look at, but of no value as illuminators.

Over their heads was an organ-loft, in which sat a musician playing some soft and melodious sort of prelude. Of course there were lights in the organ-loft; but there was a curtain behind him, while in front the organ, cased in black woodwork of the last century, rich with precious carvings, was capable of absorbing, without reflection, all the light, whether from candles, gas, oxyhydrogen, electricity, or magnesium wire, which modern science might bring to play upon it. So that no good came out of the organ-loft lights.

The minutes passed by, but no one came to relieve their meditation and suspense. The soft music, the great dark hall, the strange light in the painted glass, the row of tiny gas-jets, the novelty of the situation, produced a feeling as if they were in a church where the organist's mind was running upon secular things, or else on the stage at the opera waiting for the procession to begin. An odd feeling—such a feeling as must have passed over the minds of a City congregation two centuries and a half ago, when their Puritan ministers took for Church use the tunes which once delighted a court, and therefore belonged to the Devil.

The girl heaved a sigh of suspense, and her companion, who had all this time looked straight before him without daring to break upon the silence, or to look at his partner in this momentous ceremony, looked round. This is what he would have seen had the light been stronger; as it was, the poor man had to content himself with a harmony in twilight.

She wore, being a young lady who paid the very greatest attention to the subject of dress, as every young lady, outside Girton and Merton, ever should do, some sweet-looking light evening dress, all cloudy with lace and trimmings, set about with every kind of needlework art, looped up, tied round, and adorned in the quaint and pretty fashion of the very last year of grace, eighteen hundred and seventy-five. She wore a moss-rose in her dark hair, and had a simple gold locket hanging round her neck by a light Indian chain. She is tall, and, as is evident from the pose of her figure, she is *gracieuse;* she is shapely of limb, as you can see from the white arm which gleams in the twilight; she has delicately-cut features, in which the lips, as mobile as the tiny wavelets of a brook, dimple and curve at every passing emotion, like the pale lights of an electric battery; her eyes do most of her talking, and show all her moods—no hypocritical eyes are these—eyes which laugh and cry, are indignant, sorry, petulant, saucy, and pitiful, not in obedience to the will of their mistress whom they betray, but in accordance with some secret compact made with her heart. Give her a clear-cut nose, rather short than long; a dainty little coral of an ear, a chin rather pointed, and an oval face—you have, as a whole, a girl who in her face, her figure, the grace of her bearing, would pass for a French girl, and who yet in language and ideas was English. Her godfather called her Eleanor, which proved much too stately a name for her, and so her friends always call her Nelly. Her father, while he breathed these upper airs, was a soldier, and his name was Colonel Despard.

Taking courage from the sigh, Roger Exton tried to begin a little conversation.

"They keep us waiting an unconscionable time," he said. "Are you not tired?"

"This is the half-hour for meditation," she replied gravely. "You ought to be meditating."

"I am," he said, suppressing a strong desire to yawn. "I am meditating."

"Then please do not interrupt my meditations," she answered, with a little light of mischief in her eyes.

So he was silent again for a space.

"Do you happen to know," the man began again—men are always so impatient—"Do you happen to know what they will do to us in the ceremony of reception?"

"Tom—I mean Mr. Caledon, refused to tell me anything about it when I asked him."

"I hope," he said, fidgeting about, "that there will be no Masonic nonsense; if there is, I shall go back to the world."

"I presume," she said, "though I do not know anything about it, really—but I expect that the Sisters will give us the kiss of fraternity, and that——"

"If," he interrupted her—"If we have only got to kiss each other, it would be a ceremony much too simple to need all this mystery. After all, most mysteries wrap up something very elementary. They say the Masons have got nothing to give you but a word and a grip. The kiss of fraternity—that will be very charming."

He looked as if he thought they might begin at once, before the others came; but the girl made no reply: and just then the organ, which had dropped into a low whisper of melodious sound, which was rolling and rumbling among the rafters in the roof over their heads, suddenly crashed into a triumphant march. At the same moment, the long row of starlike flame-dots sprang into a brilliant illumination: the double doors at the lower end of the hall, at the side opposite to that where was placed the stool of repentance, were flung open, and a procession began, at the appearance of which both novices sprang to their feet, as if they were in a church.

And then, too, the hall became visible, with all its adornments.

It was a grand old hall which had once belonged to the original Abbey which Henry VIII. presented to the Dunlop who graced his reign. It was as large as the hall of Hampton Court; it was lit by a row of windows high up, beneath which hung tapestry, by a large rose window in the east, and a great perpendicular window in the west. There was a gallery below the rose, and the organ was in a recess of *pratique* in the wall at the lower end. Along the wall, at the upper, or western, end, was a row of stalls in carved woodwork; the wood was old, but the stalls were new. There were twenty in all, and over each hung a silken banner with a coat of arms. Each was approached by three steps, and each, with its canopy of carved wood, its seat and arms in carved wood, the gay banner above it, and the coat of arms painted and gilded at the back, might have served for the Royal Chapel at Windsor. Between the windows and above the tapestry were trophies of arms, with antlers, and portraits. And on the north side stood the great fireplace, sunk back six feet and more in the wall; around it were more wood carvings, with shields, bunches of grapes, coats of arms in gold and purple, pilasters and pediments, a very precious piece of carving. There was a daïs along the western end; on this stood a throne, fitted with a canopy, and overlaid with purple velvet fringed with gold. On the right and left of the throne stood two chairs in crimson velvet, before each a table; and on one table were books. In the centre of the hall was another table covered with crimson velvet, in front of which was a long cushion as if for kneeling. In front of the candidates for reception was a bar covered with velvet of the same colour.

The novices took in these arrangements with hasty eyes, and then turned to the procession, which began to file slowly and with fitting solemnity over the polished floor of the long hall. The organ pealed out the march from "Scipio."

"I haven't heard that," said the man, "since I was at Winchester; they used to play it when the judges came to church."

First there walked a row, in double file, of boys clad in purple surplices, with crimson hoods; they carried flowers in baskets. After them came twenty young men in long blue robes, tied round the waist with scarlet ropes; they carried books, which might have been music-books, and these were singing-men and serving-men. After them, at due intervals, came the Brethren and Sisters of the monastery.

There were eighteen in all, and they walked two by two, every Brother leading a Sister by the hand. The Sisters were dressed in white, and wore hoods; but the white dresses were of satin, decorated with all the splendours that needle and thimble can bestow, and the hoods were of crimson, hanging about their necks something like the scarlet hood of a Doctor of Divinity. If the white satin and the crimson hood were worn in obedience to the sumptuary customs of the Order, no sumptuary law prohibited such other decorations as might suggest themselves to the taste of the wearer. And there were such things in adornment as would require the pen of a poetical Worth to portray. For some wore diamond sprays, and some ruby necklaces, and others bracelets bright with the furtive smile of opals; and there were flowers in their hair and in their dresses—long ropes of flowers trailing like living serpents over the contours of their figures, and adown the long train which a page carried for each. As the two novices gazed, there was a gleaming of white arms, and a brightness of sparkling eyes, an overshadowing sense of beauty, as if Venus Victrix for once was showing all that could be shown in grace and loveliness, which made the brain of one of these novices to reel, and his feet to stagger; and the eyes of the other to dilate with longing and wonder.

"It is *too* beautiful," she murmured. "See, there is Tom, and he leads Miranda."

They were all young and all beautiful, these nine women, except one, who was neither young nor beautiful. She was certainly past forty, and might have been past fifty; she was portly in figure; she was dressed more simply than the rest of her Sisters, and she walked with an assumption of stately dignity; but her face was comely still and sweet in expression, though years had effaced the beauty of its lines. The Brother who led her—a young man who had a long silky brown beard and blue eyes—wore a grave and pre-occupied look, as if he was going to take a prominent part in the function, and was not certain of his part.

All the Brethren were young, none certainly over thirty; they were dressed alike in black velvet, of a fashion never seen except perhaps on the stage; and they, too, wore crimson hoods, and a cord of crimson round the waist.

Last came the Lady Abbess—the Miranda of whom the novice had spoken. She was young, not more than one or two and twenty; she wore the white satin and the crimson hood, and in addition, she carried a heavy gold chain around her neck, with a jewel hanging from it on her bosom. She, too, by virtue of her office, advanced with much gravity and even solemnity, led by her cavalier. Two pages bore her train, and she was the last in the procession. The doors closed behind her, and a stalwart man clad in white leather and crimson sash stood before the door, sword in hand, as if to guard the meeting from interruption.

The Brethren and Sisters proceeded to their respective stalls; the elder Sister was led to the table on the right of the throne, the Brother who conducted her took his place at that on the left; two stewards ranged themselves beside the two tables, and took up white wands of office; the boys laid their flowers at the feet of every Sister, and then fell into place in rows below the stalls, while the Lady Miranda, led by that Brother whom the novice irreverently called Tom, mounted the throne and looked around. Then she touched a bell, and the armed janitor laying down his sword, struck a gong once. The echoes of the gong went rolling and booming among the rafters of the roof, and had not died away before the organ once more began. It was the opening hymn appointed to be sung on the reception of a pair of novices.

"You who would take our simple vows,
Which cause no sorrow after,
Bring with you to this holy house,
No gifts, but joy and laughter.

"Outside the gate, where worldlings wait,
Leave envies, cares, and malice,
And at our feast, with kindly breast,
Drink love from wisdom's chalice.

"No lying face, no scandal base,
No whispering tongue is found here;
But maid and swain with golden chain
Of kindliness are bound here.

"To charm with mirth, with wit and worth,
My Sister, is thy duty;
Bring thou thy share of this good fare,
Set round with grace and beauty.

"And thine, O Brother? Ask thy heart!
Its best response to render;
And in the fray of wit and play,
And in the throng of dance and song,
Or when we walk in sober talk,
No borrower be, but lender.

"Stay, both, or go: free are ye still,
So that ye rest contented;
No Sister stays against her will,
Though none goes unlamented.

"And, last, to show where here below
True wisdom's only ease is,
Read evermore, above our door,
'Here each does what he pleases.'"

The first four lines were sung as a solo by a sweet-voiced boy—the first treble, in fact, in the Cathedral choir three or four miles away. The rest was sung as a four-part song by the full choir, which was largely recruited from the Cathedral, not altogether with the sanction of the chapter. But receptions were rare.

When the organ began its prelude, two of the attendants with white wands advanced side by side and bowed before the novices, inviting them to step forward. The man, whose face betokened entire approval so far of the ceremonies, offered his hand to the girl, and with as much dignity as plain evening dress allows, which was, he felt, nothing compared with the dignity conferred by the costume of the Brothers, led the new Sister within the bar to the place indicated by the stewards, namely, the small altar-like table.

Then they listened while the choir sang the hymn. The Brothers and Sisters were standing each in their stall; the Lady Superior was standing under her canopy. It was like a religious ceremony.

When the last notes died away, the Lady Superior spoke softly, addressing the Brother at the low table on her left.

"Our orator," she said, "will charge the novices."

The Brother, who was the man with the blue eyes and brown beard, bowed, and stepped to the right of the throne.

"Brethren and Sisters," said the Lady Abbess, "be seated."

"It is our duty," began the orator, "at the reception of every new novice, to set forth the reasons for our existence and the apology for our rites. Listen. We were founded four hundred years ago by a monk of great celebrity and renown, Brother Jean des Entommeures. The code of laws which he laid down for the newly established Order of Thelemites is still maintained among us, with certain small deviations, due to change in fashion, not in principle. In externals only have we ventured to make any alterations. The rules of the Order are few. Thus, whereas in all other monasteries and convents, everything is done by strict rule, and at certain times, we, for our part, have no bells, no clocks, and no rules of daily life. The only bell heard within this convent is that cheerful gong with which we announce the serving of dinner in the refectory. Again, whereas all other monasteries are walled in and kept secluded, our illustrious founder would have no wall around his Abbey; and, whereas it was formerly the custom to shut up in the convents those who, by reason of their lacking wit, comeliness, courage, health, or beauty, were of no use in the outer world, so it was ordered by the founder that to the Abbey of Thelema none should be admitted but such women as were fair and of sweet disposition, nor any man but such as was well-conditioned and of good manners. And again, whereas in other convents some are for men and some for women, in this Abbey of Thelema men and women should be admitted to dwell together, in such honourable and seemly wise as befits gentlemen and gentlewomen; and if there were no men, there should be no women. And, as regards the three vows taken by monks and nuns of religion, those assumed by this new fraternity should be also three, but that they should be vows of permission to marry, to be rich, if the Lord will, and to live at liberty.

"These, with other minor points, were the guiding principles of the Thelemites of old, as they are those of our modern Order. It is presumed, from the silence of history, that the Abbey founded by Brother Jean des Entommeures fell a prey to the troubles which shortly after befell France. The original Abbey perished, leaving the germs and seeds of its principles lying in the hearts of a few. We do not claim an unbroken succession of abbots and abbesses; but we maintain that the ideas first originated with our founder have never died.

"Here you will find"—the orator's voice deepened—"none of the greater or the lesser enemies to culture and society. The common bawling Cad will not be more rigorously exiled from our house than that creeping caterpillar of society, who crawls his ignoble way upwards, destroying the tender leaves of reputation as he goes. The Pretender has never, in any one of his numerous disguises, succeeded in forcing an entrance here. By her Ithuriel wand, the Lady Miranda, our Abbess, detects such, and waves them away. The fair fame of ladies and the honour of men are not defamed by our Brethren. We have no care to climb higher up the social scale. We have no care to fight for more money, and soil our hands with those who wrestle in the dusty arena. We do not fill our halls with lions and those who roar. We are content to admire great men, travellers, authors, and poets, at a distance, where, steeped in the mists of imagination, we think they look larger. We do not wrangle over religion or expect a new gospel whenever a new magazine is started, whenever a new preacher catches the town ear, and whenever a new poet strikes an unaccustomed strain. And we are thankful for what we get.

"Newly-elected Sister! newly-elected Brother! know that you have been long watched and carefully considered before we took upon ourselves the responsibility of your election. You did not seek election, it was conferred upon you; you did not ask, it was given. We have found in you sympathy with others, modesty in self-assertion, good breeding, and a sufficiency of culture. We have found that you can be happy if you are in the atmosphere of happiness; that you can be *spirituelle* without being cynical, that you are fonder of bestowing praise than censure, that you love not downcriers, enviers, and backbiters, that you can leave for a time the outer world, put aside such ambitions as you have, and while you are here live the life of a grown-up child. We welcome you."

He descended from the throne, and, advancing to the table, offered his hand to the young lady.

"Eleanor Despard," he said, "at this bar you leave your name and assume another to be known only within our walls. Brethren and Sisters of Thelema, you know this novice; give her a name."

The Sister at the right of the throne—the one who was no longer young—called a steward, who took cards in a salver from her and distributed them among the fraternity. There was a little whispering and laughing, but when the steward went round to collect the cards, they were all filled up.

The list of proposed names was various. One wrote Atalanta, and there was laughter and applause, and Nelly looked surprised. Another wrote Maud, "because there is none like her;" then Nelly looked at the Brother whom she had called Tom, and smiled. Another proposed Haydee; but when Sister Desdemona read out the name of Rosalind, there was a general acclamation, and it was clear what her name was to be. The officiating Brother led her to the Abbess. She mounted the three steps and knelt before the throne, while the Abbess bent over her, took her hands in her own, and kissed her lips and forehead.

"Rise, Sister Rosalind," she said; "be welcome to our love and sisterhood."

Then Desdemona beckoned another steward, who came forward bearing a train and crimson hood.

"Sister Rosalind," said the elderly Sister, "I am the registrar of the convent. You must sign your name in our book, and subscribe our vows. They are, as you have heard, three.

"First, 'I declare that I make no vow against the honourable and desirable condition of wedlock; that I will not defame the sweet name of love, and that I will never pledge myself to live alone.'"

Sister Rosalind blushed prettily and signed this vow, the light dancing in her eyes.

"The second vow is this: 'Seeing that riches give delight to life, and procure the means of culture and joy, I vow to take joyfully whatever wealth the Heavens may send.'"

Rosalind made no objection to signing this vow also.

"The third and last vow is as follows: 'I will be bound while in this place by no conventional rules; in the Abbey of Thelema I vow to live as I please. What honour and gentlehood permit, that will I do or say.'"

Rosalind signed the third.

Then Desdemona produced a box.

"In this box," she said, "is the ring of fraternity. I put it on the third finger of your left hand. Here also is the collar of the Order; I place it round your neck. Upon your shoulders I hang the mantle and the hood; around your waist I tie the crimson cord of our fraternity. Kiss me, my Sister; we are henceforth bound together by the vows of Thelema."

Thus equipped, Sister Rosalind again took the hand of her leader, and was by him presented solemnly to each Sister in turn, receiving from each the kiss of welcome.

"This is a splendid beginning," said the other novice to himself, standing at the bar alone; "I wish my turn were come."

The Brothers did not, however, he noticed with sorrow, salute their new Sister on the lips, but on the hand.

The presentation finished, the Brother led Sister Rosalind to her stall, over which hung, as over a stall in St. George's Chapel, the silken banner wrought with her coat of arms and crest; and behind the throne two trumpeters blared out a triumphant roar of welcome.

Then it was the turn of the other.

The orator went through the same ceremony. First the stewards sent round the cards, and names were suggested.

There were several. One said Brother Panurge, and another Brother Shandy, and another Brother Touchstone; and the one on which they finally agreed was Brother Peregrine.

Contrary to reasonable expectation, the newly-elected Brother Peregrine was not saluted on the lips by the Abbess or by any of the Sisters. As a substitution of that part of the ceremonial, he received a hand of each to kiss, and then the trumpeters blew another blast of welcome.

Just then the organ began again playing softly, like music in a melodrama, while the orator again stood beside the throne, and prepared to speak.

"Brothers and Sisters," he said, "we have this evening admitted two more, a man and a woman, to share our pleasures and our sports. Be kind to them; be considerate of their weaknesses; make yourselves loved by them; encourage them in the cultivation of the arts which make our modern Thelema worthy of its illustrious founder, those, namely, of thought for the joy of others, innocent pleasure in the delights which we can offer, and ingenious devices of sport and play. And all of us remember, that as the Egyptians, so we have our skeleton."

He pointed to the throne. A steward drew back a curtain, and showed, sitting on the same seat as the Abbess, a skeleton crowned, and with a sceptre in its hand.

"We have this always with us. It saddens joys which else might become a rapture; it sobers mirth which else might pass all bounds; it bids us live while we may. Brethren and Sisters, at each reception this curtain is drawn aside, to remind us of what we may not forget, but do not speak. Lady Abbess, I have spoken."

He bowed low and retired.

The Abbess rose slowly. Her white satin, her crimson mantle, her lace, the bright cord round her waist, the spray of diamonds in her hair, her own bright eyes, and sweet grave face, contrasted against the white and crouching skeleton beside her.

"My Brothers and Sisters," she said, "there remains but one thing more; you have heard that our founder was the illustrious Friar Jean des Entommeures. It is true; but the *creator* of that monk, the real designer of our Abbey, was a far greater man. Let us drink in solemn silence to the memory of the Master." One of the stewards bore a golden cup to every Brother and Sister, and another filled it with champagne.

Then the organ pealed and the trumpets brayed, and as the Abbess bowed from the throne, an electric light fell full upon a marble bust which Rosalind had not seen before. It was on a marble pillar at the end of the hall. It was the bust of the great Master—François Rabelais himself—and beneath it were the words in golden letters,

"FAY CE QUE VOULDRAS."

CHAPTER II.

"These delights if thou canst give,
Mirth, with thee I mean to live."

After the reception, it was only natural that a ball should follow. By the time the first guests arrived the throne had been carried away; the crowned skeleton was removed to the place where such mementoes should be—a cupboard. All the properties of the recent ceremony—the red velvet bar, the tables and carpets, had been put away out of sight. Only the stalls remained, with their beautiful carved work in wood, and these were stripped of cushions, crimson carpets, and banners. The hall, save for the rout-stools, was absolutely empty; the organ-loft was dark, and the band were collected in the music-gallery, which ran along the east end of the hall, waiting for the dancing to begin.

There was no one to receive people; because none of the Order were present. But when a thin gathering of guests had arrived, the band struck up the opening quadrille.

It was not a large ball, because the number of possible *invités* was limited. Given a country place, four or five miles from a small Cathedral town, in a district where properties are large and owners few; given the season of mid-July, the possibilities of selection do not look promising. There was, however, the Vicar, with his wife and three daughters. This particular Vicar, unlike many of his reverend brethren, did not regard social gatherings, when young people dance, as a Witches' Sabbath of the Black Forest. He had in his early manhood perpetrated a play, which had been actually brought out, and which ran successfully for five-and-twenty nights, once a fair run. He had the courage to justify this wickedness by always going to the theatre when he went up to London, and by attending officially, as the Vicar of Weyland, whatever was going on in the country. "Why should a man," he was wont to say, "who has taken orders, pretend to give up one of the joys of the world and keep the rest? Why should he go to a dinner and decline a dance? Why should he listen to a concert, and refuse to listen to an opera? Why should he read novels, and refuse to see plays?" As a matter of fact he wrote novels himself, under an assumed name. Does he not enjoy a feast still, in spite of his stiff collar? He was still ready, himself, for any amount of feasting. Does he not laugh at a joke? He himself laughed much, and made many jokes. He spoke good common sense; but I do not desire to see the black brigade in theatres, because the step is short from taking a part among the audience, to taking a part in the management, and then to claiming the whole share, so that one shudders to think what the stage might come to. The Vicar's daughters were pretty; they dressed in simple white frocks, with bright-coloured ribbons; and enjoyed all that could be got in their quiet and innocent lives. Above all they enjoyed an evening like this, when to a delightful dance was added the joy of seeing the latest freak of the Thelema fraternity. There was a Canon of the neighbouring Cathedral of Athelston, which furnished, besides, a good proportion of the guests. The Canon had a daughter who was æsthetic, dressed in neutral tints, parted her hair on the side, and corrected her neighbours in a low voice when they committed barbarities in art. She was not pretty, but she was full of soul, and she longed to be invited to join the Order. Then there were half a dozen officers from the depôt twenty miles away, and such contributions as the neighbouring county houses could furnish.

"At the last reception," said Lucy Corrington, the Vicar's eldest daughter, to her partner, "when they elected Sister Cecilia—Adela Fairfax, you know—they all wore the costumes of Henry the Eighth. No one ever knows beforehand how they will dress."

"Are you going to join the Order, Lucy?" asked her partner.

Lucy shook her pretty head.

"No! Papa would not like it. We are quiet people, and poor people too. We only look on and applaud. They have made the place very lively for us all; we are grateful, and hope it will last. You will persuade your son to keep it up, won't you, Lord Alwyne?"

"As if I had any influence over Alan," said his father, who was indeed Lucy's partner.

Lord Alwyne Fontaine was the fourth son of the fourth Duke of Brecknock. The red book told everybody what he could not believe, and yet could not deny—that he was fifty-five years of age. How could he be fifty-five? It was incredible. He was a man of moderate height, rather thin, and he had a face still youthful. His hair had gone off his temples, and was more than a little thin on the top. But these accidents happen to quite young fellows, say of forty, and are not at all to be taken as signs of age. His expression was uniformly one of great good humour and content, that of a man who had experienced no troubles, managed the conduct of life without excess, and yet with no solution in the continuity of pleasure, who had not hardened his heart by enjoyments purely selfish, and who still at five-and-fifty looked around him with as keen an eye as thirty years before; who was ready to enjoy life, and to enjoy it in the same way as when he began his career. No one ever found Lord Alwyne bored, out of temper, or *blasé*. No one ever heard him complain. No one ever heard him pour out the malicious theories in which some of his contemporaries rejoiced; he possessed those most inestimable qualities for a man of wealth, contentment of mind, a good heart, and an excellent digestion.

"I have not seen Alan yet," he went on. "In fact, I came down chiefly by invitation of Nelly Despard. She wanted me to see her in all her grandeur. When do they come in?"

"Directly," said Lucy. "They are never much later than half-past ten. Will not Nelly look beautiful? Here they come."

In fact, as the clock struck half-past ten, the band, which had just finished a quadrille, burst out into a grand triumphal march; no other, in fact, than Liszt's "March of the Crusaders." The doors at the end of the hall were flung open, and the Monks and Sisters of Thelema entered in grand procession.

The guests ranged themselves in double line as the procession advanced, and when it reached the middle of the hall they formed a circle round them. It was not quite the same procession as that of the reception. There were no choir boys or singing men; there were only two stewards. Sister Rosalind, the newly received, came first, after the stewards. She was dressed now, like all the rest, in white satin. She was led by Brother Lancelot, whom she had called Tom, after the manner of the world; and she bore herself bravely under the eyes of the multitude, who laughed and clapped their hands. The costumes were the same as at the reception.

"Let us talk all the scandal we can about them all, Lucy," whispered Lord Alwyne.

Lucy laughed.

"For shame! There is Nelly. Did you ever see any one look so charming as Nelly? To be sure, she is always perfectly lovely, with her bright eyes and her beautiful oval face."

Lucy sighed in thinking of her own chubby cheeks and apple face, which she was disposed to deprecate at sight of Nelly's more unusual style of beauty.

"See, that is the collar of the Order which she wears round her neck; and that crimson cord round her waist is the girdle of the Order. They have christened her Sister Rosalind. You know their motto, do you not? 'Fay ce que vouldras'—Do what you please. What a motto for a nun! And then, you know Tom Caledon, who leads her by the hand. Poor Tom! They call him Brother Lancelot in the Abbey. Everybody knows that he is desperately in love with Nelly, and she can't marry him, poor fellow, because he has no money, or not enough. Everybody is sorry for Tom."

"I dare say Tom will grow out of it," said the man of the world. "Love is a passion which improves with age—loses its fiery character, and grows mellow."

Lucy looked as if she didn't believe that story, and went on:

"There is your son, Lord Alwyne, leading Sister Desdemona."

"I see him. What is Alan's name in relig—I mean in the Order?"

"They call him Brother Hamlet, I believe, because no one can understand what he will do next."

"A very good name. I am glad the boy has got fun enough in him to enjoy a little fooling. And I am very glad that he is taking care of Desdemona."

"Do you know her, Lord Alwyne?"

"I remember her coming out at the Haymarket thirty years ago, in 'Othello.' She was Clairette Fanshawe. What a lovely Desdemona she made! And how the men went mad after her! Poor Clairette! She threw us all over, and married some fellow called Dubber, who lived on her salary, and, I believe, used to beat her. Four or five years later, her friends arranged a separation, and she retired from the stage. She has had a sad experience of life, poor Desdemona! Dubber succumbed to drink."

"She is the directress and designer of all their fêtes," Lucy went on. "She is indispensable. And they all do exactly what she orders. The next are Brother Mercutio and Sister Audrey. They are a handsome couple, and if they could only agree for an hour together, they would marry, I believe. But then they hold opposite opinions on every conceivable subject, and conduct two weekly papers, in which they advocate their own ideas. So that if they married they would have to give up the very chief pleasure of their lives—to wrangle with each other."

"Not at all, my dear child," said Lord Alwyne, "not at all. Let me disabuse your mind of that fact. I have known many most excellent people, whose only pleasure after marriage was to quarrel with each other; and the more heartily the better."

Lucy shook her head. She preferred her simple faith.

"There come Brother Benedick and Sister Romola. She is engaged, I believe, to a man in India, and he to his cousin who is an heiress ; but I should not be surprised to learn—oh ! this is dreadful girls' chatter."

"I like girls' chatter," said Lord Alwyne. "My son has got wisdom enough for the whole family. Go on, Lucy."

"Well, then—but I will not give you all the idle gossip. In such a dull place as this, we talk about each other all the day. The next couple are Bayard and Cordelia. Bayard is a V.C."

"I know him," said Lord Alwyne.

"Then come Parolles and Silvia. Brother Parolles is a Fellow of Lothian College, you know. He is *dreadfully* clever—much too clever for a girl like me to talk to. We are afraid of speaking in his presence ; and yet he puts us right very gently, and only as if he was sorry for us. His name is Rondelet."

"I know him too," said Lord Alwyne. "I met him once at Oxford when Alan was up. Now, see the advantage we old boys have over the young fellows. We don't know any science ; we don't care twopence about the new-fangled things in art ; we prefer comfort to æsthetics in furniture. We have quite cold hearts towards china——"

"But you must let us like china a little," pleaded the girl.

"And we have no belief in reforming the world. In a word, my dear young lady, we exist only to promote the happiness of our youthful friends of your sex."

"That is very delightful, I am sure !" she replied. "Well, there go Crichton and Cecilia. He chose his own name, because he said he knew nothing and could do nothing. And Cecilia plays. That is Lesmahago, the tall, thin man with the twisted nose ; Una is with him. Then Paris and Hero ; and last the new Brother, Peregrine—isn't he a funny-looking man with his crinkled face ? he looks as if he was going to laugh—leading the Abbess, Miranda. Which is the more beautiful, Miranda or Nelly ?"

"I should say, Lucy, that for a steady, lasting pattern, warranted to wear, Miranda's beauty is superior to Nelly's. For a surprise, Nelly is incomparable."

"Ah, and then Miranda always looks so queenly. She was born for what she is, the fair chatelaine of a stately palace."

"Lucy, you must come up to London for a season, if only to rid yourself of a most unusual fault in your sex."

"What is that, Lord Alwyne ?"

"You speak well of other girls."

"Oh ! but why should I not ? Miranda is the most beautiful girl I know : she is not like an ordinary girl."

"She was certainly grand in her robes last night, and she looked her part as well as if she had been all her life an Abbess.

"She would not be Abbess at first," Lucy went on, "but Mr.

Dunlop made it a condition of his lending the Court for the use of the Order."

"Hamlet has lucid intervals," said Hamlet's father--not yet the ghost. "Tell me who is the new Brother?"

"It is Mr. Roger Exton."

"Roger Exton! what Exton?" Lord Alwyne's knowledge of genealogies was extensive and profound, as becomes an idle gentleman of ancient lineage. "There are Extons of Yorkshire; is he one of them?"

"I do not know. He has not long come back from India, where I believe he made a fortune. And he has brought out a poem called 'Lalnee and Ramsami, or Love among the Assamese.' I have not read it, because papa will not send for it; but it is said to be clever."

"Pity," said Lord Alwyne, "that poets and novelists and such people are not kept under lock and key. The illusion is spoiled when you see them. Can't they go about under false names?"

"They are going to dance. See, Miranda goes out with Tom Caledon. She always opens with him, because he is the best dancer in England. I waltzed with him once at the last reception ball. O—oh!"

If there is any more stately dance, any more entirely delightful to watch, than the old-fashioned minuet, I should be glad to hear of it. There is the polonaise: there is a certain rhythmic march, whose name I do not know, which one sees on the stage: there is one single figure in the Lancers—the old Greek *entrelacement* of hands, right and left, girls one way, the men the other: all three have their beauty. And there is the waltz danced by a couple who know how to dance, who know that the Teutonic rapture is to be got, not out of a senseless scramble and a Dervish-like spin-totum movement, but by the skilful swift cadences of feet and figure, when two pairs of feet and two figures move together, actuated by a single will. But the *minuet de la cour* is an altogether stately and beautiful dance. There are suggestions in it—the awakening of love, the timidity of the lover, the respect due from cavalier to dame, the homage of the strong to the weak, the courtesy of man to woman—which are beautiful to look at when the thing is done as it was done by the Order, smoothly and perfectly. The best among them, despite years and figure, was Sister Desdemona, who trod the boards as if they were the stage, and took no more account of the spectators than if they had been so many faces in the stalls, or so many opera-glasses in the dress-circle.

When the minuet was finished, they had a grand quadrille; and then, forming once more in procession, the fraternity marched down the hall, and disappeared.

The music struck up a waltz, and the dancing began again.

Presently the Monks and the Sisters began one by one to come back, this time in ordinary evening dress. The Abbess did not reappear, nor Brother Hamlet, nor Desdemona; but most of the others came in quietly, one by one, after they had changed their dress.

There was a rush for the Sisters. Crafty men, who knew all about the customs on reception-nights, had been careful to fill up only the first dances on the card, keeping the rest free till the Sisters should appear. There could be no doubt in any one's mind that the fair inmates of the Abbey were, for the most part, fairer and much more desirable than the young ladies who were only guests. Not only were the Sisters all young, but they were all beautiful, and represented nearly every conceivable type of beauty. So that, taken together, they were contrasts; and taken separately, they were models. And they were all young—the united ages of the nine, taking Sister Desdemona out of the reckoning, would not make two hundred years—and yet they were not so young as to be girlish and silly. The charm of the very young lies wholly in innocence, ignorance, and wonder. That soon palls: take in its place the charm of a woman who, a girl still, has acquired the ideas, the culture, the sense, and the *esprit* which only a year or two of the world can give. It is a charm of which no man ever yet tired. Across the Channel, our unfortunate friends of France can only get it in the young married women. Hence the lamentable tone of their novels, which no doubt represent, not the actual life of Paris, but only what daring novelists believe, or wish to be, the actual life.

Certainly no group of ten ladies more delightful than the Sisters of Thelema could be found in England—and if not in England, certainly nowhere else in the world. They were not united by any bond of common tastes or pursuits, but only by the light chain of gentle breeding and regard for others. Thus, Sister Silvia was a Ritualist, who thought that the oftener you go to church the better it is for your soul, and that Cranmer, Latimer, and Ridley were let off very, very cheap, with mere roasting. Cecilia, on the other hand, was a Catholic, who held Ritualism in the contempt which is natural to one of the old creed. But she kept her opinion behind the portals of sight and speech, and did not allow it to be apparent. In the same way, both Silvia and Cecilia lived in amity and perfect love with Romola, who was scientific, had a laboratory, and made really dreadful stinks. By the aid of these she proposed to carry on a crusade against ecclesiasticalism among her own sex. Una, on the other hand, was artistic. She painted, modelled, sketched; she had strong ideas on the subjects of form and colour; she had a tall and slender figure which lent itself to almost any costume: and she liked heroines of novels to be *svelte*, lithe, and lissom. Sister Audrey was a genius. She went to see all the new plays, and she had actually written a play all by herself. It was offered in turn to every manager in London. Their excuses were different, but their unanimity in declining to produce it was as wonderful as it is always upon the stage. For one manager, while regretting his decision very much, said that if it wanted anything, there was a lack of incident; and another, that the overloading of incident rendered the play too heavy for modern dramatic representation; a third said that the leading incident was absolutely impossible to be put on any stage; a fourth, that the leading incident had been done so often as to be quite common and stale; a fifth, that the dialogue, though natural, was tame; a sixth, that the cut-and-thrust repartee and epigram with which the dialogue was crammed, gave the whole too laboured an air. And so, with one consent, the managers, lessees, and proprietors refused that play.

In revenge, the author, who was an amateur actress, started it in her own company, and represented it whenever she could get a hearing. There was some piquancy at the idea of an amateur play being given by an amateur company, but few of those who saw it once desired to see it again, and even the company rebelled for a time. So that now Sister Audrey had only the reputation of an amateur success to go upon. She was planning a second play on the great Robertsonian model, which, like many other misguided creatures, she imagined to consist in having no story to tell, and to tell it in a series of short barks, with rudenesses in place of wit. That was *not* Robertson's method, but she thought it was. A bright, clever girl, who, had she been content to cultivate the art of conversation, as she did the art of writing, would have been priceless. Sister Audrey also wrote novels, for the production of which she used to pay a generous publisher £50 down, and, afterwards, the cost of printing, binding and advertising, multiplied by two. So that she did pretty well in literature. In her novels the heroines always did things just ever so little unconventional, and always had a lover who had, in his early and wild days, been a guardsman. He had an immense brown beard, in which she used to bury her innocent face, while he showered a thousand kisses on her tresses. And he was always punished by marrying the bad girl, who was big and languid, quite heartless, and with a taste for port, so that he lived ever after a remorseful life, haunted by memories of his little Queenie gone broken-hearted.

Another of the Sisters, Cordelia, yearned to see womankind at work; broke her heart over committees and meetings for finding them proper work; lamented because none of them wanted to work, and because, after they had put their hands to the plough, most of them turned back and sat down by the fire, nursing babies. This seemed very sad to Cordelia.

Hero, again—she was a little bright-faced girl, not looking a bit fierce—was a worshipper of "advanced" women. She admired the "courage" of those who get up on platforms and lecture on delicate and dangerous topics; and she refused to listen to the scoffer, when he suggested that the love of notoriety is with some people stronger than the sense of shame.

The least remarkable of the Sisters, so far as her personal history was concerned, was the Abbess. Miranda had no hobbies. And yet she was more popular than any. This was due to the charm of her manner, which was sympathetic. It is the charm which makes a woman loved as well as admired. Everybody confided in her: she was the confessor of all the Sisters and a good many of the Brothers.

As for these, we shall make their acquaintance later on.

All this time the ball is going on.

Nelly Despard found her card filled up in a few moments, save for two little scratches she makes furtively opposite two waltzes. She was flushed and excited by the strangeness of the whole thing: the reception, the *minuet de la cour*, and the ball itself; but the minuet above all. The reception was cold, comparatively, because there was no audience. For the minuet she had a large and appreciative assemblage.

Tom Caledon presented himself without any *empressement*, and quite leisurely.

"Did you think, Tom," she asked, with a little *moue*, "did you think that I was going to keep my card waiting till you condescended to ask me?"

"All gone, Nell? Not one left?"

"Suppose I have kept two waltzes waiting for you."

"Thank you, Nell; I knew I could depend upon you. You always were a good fellow. Which are they?"

Then she was caught up by her partner, and disappeared from his sight.

Tom went wandering round the room, good-naturedly talking to chaperons, and asking wall-flowers to dance with him, and presently came his reward—with Nelly.

Two o'clock in the morning.

In the supper-room, Lord Alwyne, the Vicar, and the Prebendary.

"The Church should countenance all innocent amusements," said the dignitary. "Will you have another glass of champagne?"

"That is true," said Lord Alwyne; "but I have looked in vain for a Bishop at a Four-in-Hand Meet. It was very pleasant fooling to-night—glad to see Alan in it. I am going to visit him to-morrow at his cottage. Fancy the owner of Weyland Court living in a labourer's cottage. Fancy a man five and twenty years of age—sweet five and twenty—with Miranda only half a mile away, and this perfect Paradise of Houris in his own house, and yet—*can* he be my son?"

And at the same time, in another room in the Court, Alan Dunlop, Miranda, and Desdemona. The two ladies are sitting with shawls tied round their heads, at a window, opening to the garden. Alan is standing half in, half out of the room. They have forgotten the fooling, and are talking gravely.

"And you are not satisfied, Alan?" asked Miranda.

"No," he replies, "I am very far indeed from being satisfied: everything is going badly. I believe everything is worse than when I began; and I fail more and more to enter into their minds. We do not understand each other, and every day, the possibility of understanding each other seems more remote."

"All this trouble for nothing? It cannot be, Alan."

"I fear it is. But it is late, Miranda; I must go and get three hours' sleep. I have a thatching job to begin at six."

He left them, and walked rapidly away across the park.

Desdemona looked after him and sighed.

"What a pity," she said, taking a different view to the poet, "that he cannot give—to one—to a woman—that noble heart which he squanders on mankind!"

But Miranda would not discuss that question.

"Listen," she said; "that must be the last waltz. I almost wish I had gone back to the ball. But I wanted to talk to Alan quietly. Good-night, dear Desdemona."

CHAPTER III.

"They swore strange oaths and worshipped at strange shrines;
They mocked at what the vulgar hold for holy:
They scoffed at teachers, preachers and divines:
And taught despair, with cultured melancholy."

"The only fault in my son, Alan Dunlop," said his father, "is that he wants youth. He has never been young, and yet he is only five and twenty."

To want youth is a fault which, with most of us, grows every day more confirmed. It is an incorrigible vice, which only gets worse as the years run on. Here indeed we are all miserable sinners, and the greater the sin, that is, the farther off we are from youth, the greater the sorrow. Which is as it should be.

Alan Dunlop as a boy was a dreamer, with a strong physique. This impelled him into action. The way to make a great reformer, is to get a boy whose brain is like a sponge for the reception of ideas, and like a hot-house for their growth ; but when his physique is of iron, then you may make a bid at a Luther. No use, however, to produce boys whose ideas are magnificent, and temperaments torpid. He was brought up in the country altogether, at Weyland Court ; and as his mother foolishly thought him delicate, he was educated till eighteen by private tutors, under her own eyes. He was not delicate at all. And one result of his training was, that he learned a great deal more of books than if he had been at Eton ; but had no taste for boys' games, and read immensely. By his father's orders, he was made, when quite a small boy, to ride every day. Riding and walking were his only methods of taking exercise. His father, however, who spent a large part of his time in London, did not otherwise interfere ; and on finding how very different from himself this son of his was likely to turn out, ceased to manifest much interest in his education. It was clear that a boy who would joyfully spend his whole day in reading philosophy and history, who delighted to hear conversation on books, and the contents of books, would never have many points in common with himself, who, as he frankly acknowledged, aimed at nothing more elevated than to get out of life whatever pleasures a cultivated creature can. He found that there are a good many pleasures accessible to the man who has health, a good digestion, and a longish purse ; and he discovered as the years went on, that with the drawback of east wind in the spring, London offers a larger field of amusement than any other spot on the habitable globe. To be sure, Lord Alwyne Fontaine enjoyed exceptional advantages. He was the younger son of a Duke. That gave him social position, without responsibilities. He received an ample younger son's portion. He married a beautiful woman—beauty was a necessity in his scheme of life—who was also an heiress. Money was also a necessity in his scheme. With his own fortune, his wife's fortune, and the splendid estate and rent-roll which came to her, there was no obstacle to his gratifying any reasonable wish. On the other hand, he did not go on the turf ; nor did any sharks of the green table dip into his purse ; nor did he bet, save in moderation ; nor did he buy china.

When his son Alan was eighteen, and on the point of entering Lothian College, Oxford, his wife died. Weyland Court with the broad acres round it passed to the son, who took his mother's name. The widower, for his share, had all that was left of his wife's original fortune.

Then Lord Alwyne took chambers in London, and lived there, seeing little of his son, who paid him dutiful visits at the beginning of vacations, if he passed through town, or when he came up to London, not with the frivolous hope of finding amusement and innocent sport in the "little village," as some undergraduates do, but in order to follow out some side-path which led in the direction of culture and light, generally something to do with Art.

He was a shy, reserved man, while an undergraduate. He joined in none of the ordinary pursuits of the place; was not seen on the river or in the cricket-field; apparently did not know the meaning of billiards, and would have shrunk in horror from such a feast as a freshman's supper-party, with songs after it. He rode a good deal, but chiefly in a solitary way. He furnished his rooms with great sumptuousness, and was always changing the furniture for new or old things, as, from time to time, he changed his notions of advanced taste. He read the customary things, but without enthusiasm, and subsequently obtained a "second." He wrote a good deal of verse, and astonished rather than pleased himself by getting the Newdigate.

He was not, however, given over to solitude. On the contrary, he lived a great deal with his own set.

This was the set who, in religion, politics, the science of life, and literature, possessed the advanced ideas. It was the "thoughtful" set. This class read Mill, or pretended to; read Comte, or pretended to; read Ruskin, and talked about putting his ideas in practice; read—which is the shortest road nowadays to learning—all the reviews on all the new books, so that they could talk as if they had read the books themselves; stood before pictures in a row for half an hour together, in silence, as if the thoughts that arose in them were too deep for words; took up an engraving and laid it down with a sigh; circulated little poems, not unlike the sonnets of Mr. Rossetti, or the earlier poems of Swinburne, to whom indeed they owed their inspiration, which they showed to each other, and carried about as if they were precious, precious things which only they and their set were worthy to receive. Mostly the verses turned on events of but little interest in themselves, as for instance one, written by Rondelet himself, mystic and weird, showed how the poet stood beneath an archway during a shower, and saw a girl, who came there for the same purpose, having no umbrella. That was all. That was the pathos of it: she had no umbrella. Some, of course, were on hazardous subjects, the disciples holding the creed, in common with the author of "Jenny," that Art can be worthily bestowed upon any subject whatever. They read, or affected to read, a good deal of certain modern French verse—not Victor Hugo's *bien entendu.*

When Alan Dunlop was in his second year, the Great Movement of the Nineteenth Century began; at least, that is what they called it. I believe it was Alan himself who started it. I mean, of course, the project for advancing humanity by digging ditches and making roads. They sallied forth, these pioneers and humanists, spade in hand; they dug and were not a bit ashamed: in the evening they came home slowly, with backs that ached a great deal, with hands blistered where they were not horny, and with a prodigious appetite, to dine in each other's rooms, talk much about the canons of Art, which they thought they understood, drank vast quantities of claret, spoke judicially on all subjects under the sun, sighed and became melancholy over the little poems of which I have spoken, and lamented the deplorable ignorance of their elders. A distinguishing mark indeed of the school was the tender pity with which they regarded the outer world; another was their contempt for all other views of life or things. If they met men who held other views—a thing which will happen to even the most exclusive set—they sought to overwhelm them with a single question—only one. They would look up quickly, when there was a pause, and fire their one question, after the manner of Sokrates, as they spelt his name. They did not look for a reply. Now and then they got one, and were even sometimes held up to public derision by some blatant North-countryman, who not only would keep his own vile Philistine opinion, but also dared to defend it.

Their leader was Mr. Paul Rondelet, the author of most of the little manuscript poems. He really was almost too highly cultured, so much so that he could not possibly avoid pitying his fellow-creatures. He was rather a tall man, with a droop in his head; and he had long white fingers, which played plaintively about his face while he sat. He spoke in a low voice, as if exhausted by the effort of living among humans; and he spoke with melancholy, as if his superiority were a burden to him; he affected omniscience; he talked in a vague way, but a good deal, about the *Renaissance*—an epoch which his school keep bottled up all for themselves, as if it were to be enjoyed only by the worthy; he said that we have only one great living poet, Mr. Rossetti; and one who would be great if his meaning were not so plain and simple, Mr. Browning. He said also that the greatest master of modern English is Mr. Pater, and that Mr. Whistler is the greatest artist. He shuddered when Christianity was mentioned; he groaned when any one admired any other modern writer, poet, or painter. As regards politics, he thought a refined despair the only attitude worthy of a great intellect, and he wished to convey the impression that behind his brow lay infinite possibilities—things—which would make the whole world wonder when they came to be actually done, could he be only—ah! if only—persuaded to pass from meditation to action. He had got a First in the History Tripos, and was a martinet in historical matters; went into agonies if any one used the word Anglo-Saxon; grew angry over the Holy Roman Empire; called Charlemagne, Karl, and Lorraine, Lothringen; spelt his Greek words as in the Greek character, and startled the unwary by talking of Kuros, Thoukudides, Alkibiades, and Korkura; almost ahead of the most advanced line; admitted nothing good except in Germany, yet had a secret passion for Zola, Feydeau, Belot, and other writers. He had no money, being the son of a country vicar with a living of £500 a year; and his fellowship would expire unless he took Holy Orders in a very few years. If it had not been for the amazing conceit in expression, in attitude, and in voice, Mr. Rondelet would have been certainly good-looking. Nature meant him even to be handsome; too much culture spoiled that intention.

It was, as a matter of fact, a school of prigs. The truthful historian cannot deny it. Many of them were unhealthy and even morbid prigs. Some of them are still at Oxford; but some may now be found in London. They lounge about sales of china and *bric-à-brac*, they take afternoon tea at the Club, and they worship at the Grosvenor Gallery. They are not loved by any men that I have come across, but are greatly believed in by certain women. They are always promising to do great things, but nothing ever comes. Meantime, they grow daily sadder and yet more sad over the wretched stuff which the outside world, the babbling, eager, fighting world, calls art, poetry, and fiction.

Alas! the outside world cares nothing for its prigs; it goes on being amused; it refuses any hearing to people who neither amuse nor instruct; it is, as it ever has been, a world of humanity, and not a world of prigs. Things there are which one cannot understand about these young men. What will they be like when they grow old? Why do they all talk so much about the *Renaissance?* And will they go on thinking it a proof of superior intellect to affect the atheist of the Italian scholar type? Surely the works of Beccadelli and Filelfo must pall after a time.

Alan Dunlop was, as an undergraduate, no mean disciple of this academy; but he had saving qualities. He was in earnest while the other men were mostly playing, and he had the courage of his convictions. He was the last to abandon the sacred task of digging ditches and making roads, and only gave it up when it became quite clear to him that he could do no more good, single-spaded, to humanity. Then he began to cast about for some other and some better way. Nothing was to be too rough, nothing too difficult; nothing was to require too hard work, if it only was the best thing to do.

He remembered, too, that he was wealthy, and, with his friends of the exalted school, began to talk about the responsibility of wealth. It is rare and highly refreshing to find a rich man trying to pass with all his baggage on his back through that narrow archway, intended solely for unladen foot passengers, known as the "Camel's Eye." Many, therefore, were the discussions held among the small circle of intimate philosophers, as to the duties which this responsibility involved. Prigdom was agitated. As none of them had a farthing except Alan, all were agreed on the doctrine of self-sacrifice. The advancement of humanity was to be the aim: the means, so far as one set of most superior spirits could effect, were to be the fortune of the only rich man among them. There were some, Rondelet among them, who went so far as to hint at a general division of the property, so that instead of one, there might be half-a-dozen apostles. Alan Dunlop could not, however, be brought to see things in this light, and it was clearly impossible to ask him to divide in so many words.

"There is no work," said Rondelet, who would not have gone a step out of his way to pick up a fallen man, "that is not honourable in the cause of humanity."

"True," murmured a certain weak brother whose faith was small, and who afterwards became that thing which young Oxford mostly contemns, a clerical fellow, and a methodical parish curate. "True; you remember, by the way, how Jerome Paturot, in the sacred cause of humanity, blacked the boots of the fraternity."

"Of course," Rondelet replied, "one means real work."

"Blacking boots *is* real work, as well as digging ditches. Try it for an hour or two."

"The thing is," said Dunlop, "to find out what is the best work to do, and then to do it, whatever it may be. We have to find out, each for himself, our proper place in the great army and our work when we get there."

"One thing at least is certain," said Rondelet loftily; "it will be ours to command."

"Say, rather," Dunlop replied, "to lead."

With that conviction, that his business was to lead, he left Oxford. It was not a bad conviction for a young man to begin the world with.

His friend, Rondelet, as I have explained, was fortunate in obtaining a fellowship. He remained behind to lecture, sitting sadly, for this was a sort of thing far below a man of intellect and culture, in the College Chapel; listening mournfully to the talk of the senior Dons, poor harmless creatures, contented with the wisdom of their forefathers; commenting to undergraduates on Plato with the melancholy which comes of finding that all modern philosophy and all modern theology are exploded things; an object of interest to some, and of intense dislike to others. As most of the undergraduates revolted from the new paganism of these young lecturers, and went over to Ritualism, with a tendency to become 'verts, Mr. Rondelet grew sadder. Also it grew daily into a more melancholy subject of reflection with him, that unless he took Holy Orders, unless he became that despicable thing upon which he poured out so many vials of pity and contempt, his fellowship would shortly leave him, and he would actually—he—Rondelet—become penniless. He, with his really cultivated taste for claret, and with a love for little dinners in which dining was exalted to a fine art, and with a taste for all that a young bachelor mostly desires!

For it is an extraordinary thing to observe how the superior class, while they can never sufficiently deride and pity the British workman who gets drunk—Tom and 'Arry who go down to Margate brandishing bottles of stout, and the honest British tradesman who when his income expands lets two puddings smoke upon the board—are of all men the least inclined to forego the pleasures of the senses. No anchorites, the prigs of the nineteenth century; and if they do not drink so much as their ancestors, it is that they have discovered the very much greater pleasure to be got by keeping the palate clean, in which we had better all imitate them.

At two-and-twenty Alan Dunlop returned to Weyland Court, eager to start upon his career as a regenerator of the world.

How to begin?

Miranda, who was now eighteen, and as beautiful as the day, was as eager as himself to witness the rapid strides in the direction of culture about to be made by the peasantry of the place. They held constant council together. The experiment was to be tried by Alan Dunlop on his own people first, and, if successful, was to be repeated on hers. That was right, because, as a girl, she would not enter personally on the struggle with such vigour or such authority as her friend. She would watch while he worked; she would make notes and compare, and set forth results. Meantime they had no doubt but that in a short time the manners of the people would be raised almost to their own level.

"Of course they will give up drink, Alan," said Miranda.

"That must be the first thing. I will begin by becoming a teetotaler." Alan said this with a sigh, for like the majority of mankind, the juice of the grape was pleasant unto him. "We must lead, Miranda."

"Yes." She too sighed, thinking of champagne at suppers and luncheons. "And smoking too," added Miranda.

"Yes, I shall burn all my cigar-cases, and turn the smoking-room at the Court into an additional study." This, too, was a sacrifice, because the "school" at Oxford were fond of choice brands.

"And they must be encouraged to choose subjects of study."

"Yes," said Alan, "of that we must talk very seriously. What should they study first?"

It was decided that they could not do better than begin with the science of Hygiene.

The two conspirators took a leisurely stroll down the village street, which was half a mile long, with cottages on either side.

There was clearly a good deal of work before this village could become a city of Hygeia, and the hearts of both glowed at the prospect of tough work before them, just as the heart of Hercules must have glowed when he smelt and beheld the Augean stable; or that of Mr. Gladstone must bound with gladness when he stands before some more than usually tough monarch of the forest, while crowds are there to witness his dexterity.

Miranda Dalmeny, not yet Abbess of Thelema, was in one respect like Alan. She was an heiress, and owner of an estate which marched with that of Alan Dunlop. Her father was dead, and by his death she became at once one of the richest girls in a rich county. Her house, far inferior in stately grandeur to Weyland Court, stood on the edge of Weyland Park. It was called Dalmeny Hall. Here she lived with her mother, who was an invalid; a fact which kept her almost entirely in the country. And here, from infancy, she had known Alan Dunlop. As children they walked, ran, and rode together; as boy and girl they played, quarrelled, made it up, and told each other all their thoughts. Then came a time when Miranda, *more feminino*, retired within herself, and felt no longer the desire to pour confidences into Alan's ear. He, however, went on still. So that she followed him through his boyish readings; through the speculations with which he amused his tutor in the critical age of sixteen to eighteen; and through the realms of impossible culture, which his imagination, while an undergraduate, revealed to the astonished girl.

They were, in a way, like brother and sister. And yet—and yet—brothers and sisters may kiss each other with kisses which Hood calls "insipid things, like sandwiches of veal." And indeed they do lack a something. Brother and sister may know each other's tendencies and motives without being told; they may tease each other; they may depend upon each other, ask services of each other, and exact as well as give. Alan Dunlop and Miranda did not kiss each other; they did not exact any service, nor did they tease each other, nor did they pretend to any knowledge of motive, tendency, or aim in each other. So far they were not brother and sister. Yet they always comforted each other with the thought that such was their relationship. They wrote long letters one to the other, and they had long talks, rides, and evenings together. Weyland Court was a dull great place for a young man to be in all alone; and he spent most of his time, while in the country, at Dalmeny Hall.

Alan began his grand experiment in the advance of humanity with a lecture in the school-room.

The labourers all came, all listened with the same stolid stare or closed eyes with which they received the Vicar's sermon. The Vicar was there, too; he sat in the chair and contemplated the audience with a benevolent but incredulous smile.

When the lecture was over, he began to throw cold water, as experienced Vicars will, on the young Squire's projects.

"It was delightful, Alan, and so true," cried Miranda.

"Yes, yes!" said the Vicar. "Did you notice their faces, Weyland?"

"Not much; I was thinking of my subject."

"I did; they wore exactly the same expression as they have in church, during the sermon. My dear boy, I have watched them for five and twenty years; I have tried them with every kind of sermon, and nothing makes any difference with them."

Miranda looked as if the appearance of a young prophet would make all the difference. The Vicar understood her look, and smiled.

The lecture had been on the "Beauty of Cleanliness." It will hardly be believed that next day not one single attempt was made to improve the village, and yet the language of the discourse was worthy of Ruskin, an imitation, indeed, of that great writer's style.

This was disheartening.

The young Squire tried another lecture, and yet another, and a fourth; yet no outward improvement was visible.

"You have sown the seed, Alan," said Miranda, consoling him.

O woman — woman! when disappointment racks the brow——!

But this was seed which, like mustard and cress, ought to come up at once if it meant to come up at all. It did not come up.

"What shall I do?" Alan asked the Vicar.

"You are young; you are anxious to do the best, and you do not see your way. That is all natural. Tell me, Alan, do you think that a three years' residence at Oxford has been quite enough by itself to teach you the great art of managing and leading men? Believe me, there is no task that a man can propose to himself more mighty, more worthy or more difficult."

Alan assented to the objection.

"You think I have begun too soon, then? Perhaps a year's more reading——"

"Hang the reading, man! You have begun without comprehending mankind, Alan. Put away your books, and look around you. Whenever you are trying to find out how other people look at things, remember that there are a hundred ways of looking at everything, and that every one of these ways may be burlesqued and misrepresented, so as to become contemptible to ninety-nine men, but not to the hundredth man. That is the important thing. You've got to consider that hundredth man; you'll find him always turning up, and he is, I do assure you, the very deuce and all to manage."

Alan laughed.

"And if I were you, my boy, I would travel. See the world. Go by yourself, and forget your theories."

Alan consulted Miranda. She urged him, because, with womanly insight, she saw that he was yet unripe for the task he had set himself, to take a year of quiet wandering.

"Travel," the Vicar wrote to Lord Alwyne, "will knock the new-fangled nonsense out of his head."

It would, in fact, do nothing of the kind; it would only modify the new-fangled nonsense, and give the traveller new ideas with which to mould his schemes.

Alan packed up his portmanteau, shook hands with Miranda, and went away by himself.

CHAPTER IV.

"Home-keeping youths have ever homely wits."

"ONCE away from England and the new crotchets," repeated the Vicar, "Alan will come round again."

"Do you think men *can* grow out of prigdom?" asked Lord Alwyne plaintively.

"Define me a prig," returned the Vicar.

"Definition requires thought. It is hardly worth the exertion."

Lord Alwyne sat up, and nerved himself for an effort.

"Yet you recognise a prig when he speaks, just as you know a cad when you see him, and before he speaks. Not only does the prig approach every subject from the point of view peculiar to prigdom, but all prigs speak in the same tone. Do you remember the Oxford prig when we were undergraduates? He had advanced views, if I remember right, about episcopal authority. He was offensively and ostentatiously earnest, too. But he was mild—our prig was mild—compared to the modern creatures among whom my unhappy son has thrown away his youth. Let us define a prig as a man who overdoes everything. He becomes a prig because he is not equal to his assumed position. He is not, for instance, equal to the duties of a critic, and falls back upon unquestioned maxims, which rule his opinions. And the universal maxim among prigs is that no one has a right to be heard outside their own body. I wonder," he went on with a sigh, "I really wonder what unfortunate Oxford has done to be so plagued with prigs. You go to Cambridge, and you find them not—at least, I am told they are rare. At Oxford there are two or three gathered together in every Common Room."

"It is the effect of too much cultivation on a weak brain," said the Vicar, "and wears off as men get older. Affectations never last in theology, literature, or art. These young men have nothing new to say, and yet desire greatly to seem to have something new. So they invent a sort of jargon, and call it the only language for the expression of the 'higher thought!'"

"Yes," said Lord Alwyne, "everything with them is in the comparative degree. There is the higher thought, the nobler aim, the truer method—meaning, I suppose, their own thought, and aim, and method. Well—well! and so you really think, Vicar, that my son will come back improved; will drop the livery of prigdom, and talk and think like other people."

"I am sure he will," said the Vicar confidently.

Alan was away for two years. During this space of time he went all round the world making observations, his object being chiefly to discover how best to lead his fellow-men.

First he went to Quebec. On the steamer he made the acquaintance of the third officer, a man of great experience, who had once been admiral in command of the fleet of the Imam of Muscat. He resigned his appointment because the Imam refused to rank him higher than the twenty wives' allowance, whereas he stuck out for such superior rank as is granted by right to forty wives.

"Not," said the honest fellow, "that *I* wanted twenty wives, bless you, nor forty neither, being of opinion that a sailor gets on best when he's got nobody to draw his pay but himself. But the honour of my country was at stake. So I struck my pennant, and came away; and here I am, aboard the *Corsican*, third officer in the Dominion Line. That's a drop from an admiral, ain't it!"

Alan did not remember to have heard any of the customs peculiar to Muscat, and was surprised to learn that the people were most open to influence, and most easily persuaded. He asked how that influence was maintained.

"Give your orders," said the ex-admiral. "If they don't carry out them orders, cut their livers out."

This method, however effective, was clearly impracticable as regarded Alan's own tenants. And yet it seemed to himself by no means unsuitable to the people of Muscat. Why was this? Why should a thing good for Muscat be bad for England? He reflected, however, that he had not yet so far schooled himself in the enthusiasm of humanity as to recognise an equal in every thick-skulled negro or wily Asiatic. So that it could not, really, be good for Muscat to cut out livers.

When he got to Quebec he began to make inquiries about the French Canadians. They bore the best character in the world. They were pious, he was told; they were sober; they were industrious; they were honest; they were fond parents of a prolific offspring. He went among them. After, with great difficulty, getting to understand their language—their talk is that of a country district in Normandy, in the seventeenth century—he found out that they were all these things—and more. The more was not so attractive to the stranger. Their contentment he found was due to profound ignorance, and their want of enterprise to their contentment.

"You may lead the people," a priest told him, "with the greatest ease, so long as you do not ask them to receive a single new idea."

Now what Alan wanted was, to inspire his people with the newest of ideas, and with an ardent desire for new ideas. What seemed good for French Canadians was not good for Englishmen. So he went westward—stopped a few nights at Montreal, which is the place where the English Canuk, the French Canadian, the Yankee, the Englishman, the Scotchman, the Irishman, the German, and the Jew meet, and try their sharpness on each other. It is a very promising city, and will some day become illustrious. But there was little reason for a social philosopher to stay there. He went still westward, and reached Toronto. This was like being at Edinburgh. There, however, he heard of those backwood settlements where the forests have been cleared, and the land planted, by men who went there axe in hand, and nothing else. It is only a single day's journey to get from the flat shores of Toronto, and the grey waves of Lake Ontario, to the hills and rocks, the lakes, firs, and hemlocks of the backwoods. And there Alan found himself among a people who were not led, but who moved on by themselves, under the guidance of their own sense and resolution. This phenomenon surprised him greatly, and he made copious notes. None, however, of the stalwart farmers could give him any philosophical reasons for the advance of the colony.

"We send the little ones to school," one of them told him. "We have our singing choirs and our lectures, and our farms to attend to, and we mean to push on somehow."

That is the difference, Alan observed, between the common Englishman and the Canadian. The latter means to push on somehow. How to instil that idea into his own people? He made more notes, and returned to Toronto. Then he went to Niagara and stayed there for a month, meditating over against the mighty Falls, till the echoes of the thundering river, rolling louder and louder, and the thought of the mass of ever-falling waters growing daily greater and greater, grew too loud and too vast for his brain; and then he came away. He was perplexed by the contrast of the French Canadians, led by their priests, who never want to move, and the English led by the one thought, that they "mean to push on somehow," which is to them like the cloud of smoke by day and the pillar of fire by night. And he thought all the time of his own rustics who came like sheep to his lectures, sat like sheep while he delivered them, and went away understanding no more than sheep.

However, in the States he would certainly learn something. Everybody who is going to try a new social experiment should begin by going to America, if only to strengthen his faith. This, in new social experiments, is apt to be shaken by the fear of ridicule. Anything like a novel adjustment of the relations between capital and labour, landlord and tenant, farmer and labourer, buyer and seller, husband and wife, governor and governed, requires in England such extraordinary courage and confidence that it is absolutely indispensable first to visit a country where new institutions are attempted without such hesitation and fear. New things are tried in America which would be impossible in England, and yet they do not succeed, because, I suppose, the most red-hot reformer becomes Conservative when you touch the unwritten laws by which all his ideas are governed unconsciously to himself.

Alan Dunlop was going, somehow, to reconstruct the whole of the social fabric. He was about to show on the small scale of his own estates how culture—what his friends called "The

Higher Culture," sighing when they thought how rare it is—may co-exist with the necessities of the roughest daily toil, and differences in rank or station be recognised by those who are yet all equal in their love of "The Higher Art." It had been his favourite thesis, disputed by the rest, while still among the prigs, that this was not only possible, but within the compass and power of any one man.

"Why," he would ask, with as much warmth as the fashion of his school allows, "why should a man, because he goes out hedging and ditching, because he carts muck, feeds pigs, even" —he shuddered—"even kills them, be unable to rise to the levels on which We stand? Can we not imagine him, when his work is done, sitting with thankful heart in the contemplation of some precious work, over which thought may plunge ever deeper, and never come to the end of all it teaches?"

It was generally conceded that the imagination might go so far as to conceive this vision. Then Alan would continue to argue that whatever the mind of man can conceive, the hand of man can execute; in other words, that the ploughman might be gently and yet rapidly led upward, till his thoughts rested habitually on the highest levels. And this was his mission in life.

He visited, and examined with the greatest interest, all the new social and religious communities which he could hear of. There were those modern Essenes who have everything in common, and who neither marry nor are given in marriage; those thinkers who hold that divorce should be granted on the formal request of either party to the contract of that partnership, which we English hold to be indissoluble even by common consent of both husband and wife, except for reasons held by law sufficient; the community who divide the work among each other, and serve it out irrespective of liking or fitness, so that he who would fain be writing at home has to go out and weed the cabbages or sell the strawberries; the people who work or are idle just as they please; the institution—in this he was particularly interested—in which the rude farm-work of the morning is followed by transcendental discussion in the evening. Alan was disappointed here, because he only had one evening to spare for the place, and they asked so much about England that it was bed-time before the philosophy began. Then he visited a community in which emancipated woman ruled subject man, and let him have a rough time, until he either revolted or ran away. And he went to see the place where the Elect live together, and dance for the love of the Lord. Then he became acquainted with the doctrines and tenets of vegetarians, egg-and-fruit-arians, wheat-and-corn-arians, and total abstainers. He found a little knot of people who would have neither ruler, magistrate, elder, priest, nor clergyman among them at all, but ruled their affairs for themselves by a parliament which sits every evening for seven days in the week, and where the talk never ceases. This is the reason why, outside their Parliament House, they are a silent folk. He also visited the Mormons, the Mennonites, and Oneida Creek. And everywhere he made notes.

In all his researches on the American continent, he was struck with the fact that the people had no leaders; they seemed to lead themselves. That unhappy country has no heaven-sent and hereditary officers. They have to live without these aids to civilisation; and it must be owned they seem to get on very well by themselves. But the British labourer requires—he absolutely requires—thought Alan, to be led. And how to lead him? How to acquire influence over him? How to become his prophet? How to instil into his mind a purpose? This dreadful difficulty oppressed our inquiring traveller, followed him from one country to another, and became at times a sort of Old Man of the Island upon his shoulders.

"Send him over here, sir," said an American with whom he discussed, without exposing his own views, the character of the British ploughman; "send him over here, sir! He can't sit down and be contented in this climate. Discontent is in the air; ambition is in the air; and there are no parish workhouses. What you've done with your labourer is this: you've planted him in a juicy and fertile country, where the rain and fogs make him crave for drink. He's got a farmer driving him at starvation wages on the one side, and the clergyman's wife and the squire's wife and daughters cockering him up on the other. What with too low wages and too much alms-taking, you've knocked all the man out of him. Here he gets no cockering; there's no squire, no vicar, no union, and no distribution of blankets and flannel. You go home, sir, and try your folk on our tack for fifty years or so."

That was absurd, when Alan wanted to show his results in five years, or thereabouts.

"Of course," his American friend went on, "of course it is absurd to tell you, sir, because you know it already, the main difference between our men and yours."

"You mean——"

"I mean the land. When you get your yeomen back again, if ever you do, you will find that out. Do you own land, sir?"

"I do."

"Then let your men buy it up on easy terms; and then you leave them alone to work out their own salvation."

This was a hard saying for a young man who had great possessions—give up his land, and then leave the people alone?

What then was the good of having been a leader in undergraduate advanced circles, and an acknowledged exponent of the Higher Thought?"

After his experiences in the Eastern States, he crossed the Continent, and visited California; there he went to see mining cities, the Yosemite Valley, the City of Sacramento, and the Chinese quarter of San Francisco. There were also the lions. From San Francisco he went to Japan, which he found Anglicised; and from Japan he went to Hong Kong. This enabled him to visit the sleepy old city of Macao, where the manners and customs are half of Portugal, half of China, and Canton. The student in social economy cannot get much assistance from the Chinese. A nation who, when they have got a man too lazy, too vicious, too worthless for anything else, make him a priest, may be used by advanced thinkers to point an epigram or illustrate a sneer, but cannot inspire such enthusiasm as leads to admiration.

Alan completed his journey round the world in the usual way—he went to Calcutta, Delhi, Simla, Cashmere, and Bombay. He landed at Suez, and after the usual voyage up the Nile and down again, he rode through the Holy Land, and thence across Asia Minor to Erzeroum, finishing the whole by travelling from Odessa to Moscow and St. Petersburg, and so home. I hope that he finds the observations he then made on Russian civilisation of use to him at the present juncture.

It is not given to every young man of three or four and twenty to make this extended survey of humanity in general. The general effect produced on the mind of this traveller was revolutionary. Partly, as the Vicar anticipated, the old things fell away from him. He ceased to think in the narrow grooves of exclusive prigdom; he found that men and women may hold different views from himself, and yet be pleasant, and not Philistine; he saw that a good deal of the Art he had been taught to reverence was but a poor thing, conveying in stiff pretence at ease, weak or well-used thoughts with feebleness of expression; he understood what a wretched quality is that intellectual conceit which he had been accustomed to think a mark of distinction; and he really did quite succeed in comprehending that Oxford is *not* the centre of the universe; and he left off being sad. Now these were great gains. He wrote to Miranda on his arrival in London:

"I hope to see you the day after to-morrow. I have an immense deal to say, both of the past and the future. I think I have discovered my error in the past, and its remedy for the future. We tried to improve our people by injunction and precept, pointing out methods and rules. That I am convinced is not the best way. They will neither be led nor ordered. But suppose, Miranda, that one were to walk beside them, work with them, eat with them, play with them, be one of them, and thoroughly enter into their very thoughts—how would that do?"

"How would that do?" echoed Miranda in dismay, as she read the letter. "And what in the world does Alan mean? Is he going to put on a smock-frock?"

CHAPTER V.

"Rich with the spoils of travel, home he came."

Alan came home. As a dutiful son he called upon his father, in his chambers. Both were agreeably surprised. The father did not seem to the son so frivolous as he had been, nor did the son appear to the father so weighed down with the responsibilities of his position.

"I congratulate you, Alan," said Lord Alwyne—it was at noon; the man of the world celebrated his son's return, after the fashion of the world, with a little mid-day luncheon, which he called a breakfast—"I congratulate you, my son. You have seen the world, and shaken off your Oxford crotchets."

"Say, exchanged some of them for new ones, and modified others," said Alan. "We were ignorant at Oxford; but we used to search for ideas. If I am changed, however, you are not."

"I am two years older, which is two years worse. In other respects, I believe I am much the same as when you last saw me. Life has nothing new to offer after fifty; and it is a good thing to enjoy the same old pleasures. I still find good wine desirable; I prefer young women to old; I like cheerful people better than those who weep; and though the cask is getting low, I am glad to say that it still runs clear."

His son looked round the room. His father was quite right, and there was no change. The same statuettes, pictures, and books, the same comfortable chairs, the same air of studied and artistic pleasantness about everything, as if the very furniture had to be consulted about its companions. And on the little table in the window, the same pile of letters and invitations; most of them in feminine handwriting. No change; and yet he did not find this kind of life so entirely frivolous as in the old days, when to think of his father's manner of living was to raise up the fifth commandment before his eyes like a ghost, with warning gesture. Surely Alan Dunlop had made a great step out of prigdom when he arrived at the stage of toleration for a life which was not tormented by a sense of responsibility.

He even envied his father. Not that he would exist in the same way; but he envied the happy temper which enables a man to live in the passing moment, and to let each single day begin and end a round of endeavours after happiness.

"If one may ask, Alan"—his father was lying in one of those *chaises longues* which give support to the feet, his cigarette-case was on a little table beside him, with a cup of coffee, and his face, after the excellent breakfast, was more than usually benevolent—"If one may ask, Alan, about your plans for the future? Let me see, when you went away it was after proposing to reform the world by means of evening lectures, I believe."

"Yes," Alan replied, a little shortly; "I was younger then. The people came, but they thought they were in church, and treated my lecture like a sermon; that is, they went to sleep."

"Just what one would have expected. By the way, your remark is a dangerous one in these Radical times. People might ask, you know, what kind of teachers those have been to whom we have committed the care of the poor, if it is proverbial that sleep and preaching go together."

Alan laughed. This was one of the few points in which he could agree with his father. Nothing pleases the advanced thinker—say, a thinker of the higher order—than a sneer at the clergy. It is pleasant, I suppose, to feel one's self so much superior to the constituted spiritual teachers of the people.

"Lectures are of no use," Alan went on, "by themselves. We must not only direct and teach, but we must lead. My next attempt will be to lead."

"Ye—yes," said his father; "that sounds well as a general principle. To descend to particulars, now."

"My project is hardly ripe just yet," Alan replied; "when it is in working order, I will ask you to come down and see it for yourself. Will that do?"

"Perfectly, perfectly, Alan. Nothing is more wearisome than a discussion of probabilities. If I find your plan a failure, I can enjoy the luxury, since I know nothing about it beforehand, of swearing that I always knew it to be impracticable. Do not deprive me of that luxury."

Alan laughed.

"I am going down to the Court this afternoon," he said, "I shall talk over my schemes with Miranda, and take her advice."

"Miranda!" his father's face lit up, as it always did, at the thought of a pretty woman. "Miranda! She was pretty when you went away; she is lovely now, and full of fancies. I love a woman to have whims, always looking out, you know, for the new gospel. It is delightful to find such a girl. She was up in London last season; turned the heads of half the young fellows, and all the old ones; refused a dozen offers, including Professor

Spectrum, who thought she came to his lectures out of love for him, whereas she came, you see, because she thought physics and chemistry a part of the modern culture. Then she went back to her place in the country; and I believe she is there still. I will go down, as soon as these confounded east winds disappear, and make love to her myself. I will, Alan, upon my word I will."

Alan looked as if he hardly approved of this frivolous way of discussing Miranda, and presently went away, whereupon Lord Alwyne sat down and wrote a letter.

"MY DEAR MIRANDA,

"It is two o'clock in the afternoon. I have written all my letters, had breakfast with Alan, smoked three cigarettes, and read all the papers; what remains, but to write a letter, all about nothing, to the loveliest girl I know? N.B.—This is not old-fashioned politeness—Regency manners—but the natural right of a man who has kissed you every year, at least once, since you were a baby in arms. You will have seen Alan before you get this letter. Tell me what you think of him. For my own part, I find him greatly improved. He has lost that melancholy which naturally springs from having had such very superior persons for his friends. He is livelier; he has more feeling for the frivolities of an old man like myself. He is, in a word, much less of a prig than he was. Imagine the joy of a father who hates prigs. I am not without hopes that he may yet come to the point of being able to laugh at a good story.

"Of course, he has a head full of projects, and he will carry them straight to you. I was afraid, at one point of the breakfast, that he was going to confide them to me; but he refrained, for which I am grateful. I forgot to tell you that he accepted the comfort of my chambers and the little light follies of my conversation without that mute reproachful gaze, which used to make me wonder whether he really was my son, or whether he had been changed at nurse, and belonged, perhaps, to the converted carpenter. As, however, his ideas, filtered through your brain, will assume a far more attractive form, I confess I should like you to write me word what they amount to; and, as I may be allowed to take some interest in his proceedings, I shall ask you to throw all the weight of your good sense in the scale. If he should propose to part with the property for any philanthropic schemes, I think I would go the length of locking him up in a private lunatic asylum, where they will tickle the soles of his feet with a feather.

"Writing to you about Alan makes me think of a conversation we had, you and I, that afternoon last year, when you gave up a whole day to delight an elderly lover of yours with your society. You remember the talk, perhaps. We were floating down the river under the Clieveden woods, you and I, in a boat together. I told you what were my greatest hopes. You blushed very prettily, but you said nothing at first, and that elderly lover promised you, at your own request, never to speak of such a thing again; and never, even in the most distant manner, to suggest such a possibility to Alan.

"For once—I believe the very first time in all my life—I am going to break a promise made to a lady, and speak to you about 'such a thing' again. Those hopes have revived again, and are stronger than ever. 'Such a thing' would make me happy about Alan's future. As for his present, it is not right that a boy of his age, sweet five and twenty, should be chasing a philanthropic will-o'-the-wisp, when all round him, in this delightful world, there are flowers to gather, feasts to hold, and the prettiest women that ever were to fall in love with. Life ought to be to him, as it has been to me, one Eden of delight, and he makes it a workshop. Why, he even mentioned your name—yours, without any apparent emotion, without hesitation, blushing, or sinking of the voice. Think of it, when even I, after all my experience, handle the name of Miranda with a kind of awe, as befits that of a goddess.

"And yet he is my son, really. I must inquire about that converted carpenter. Sometimes I feel constrained—pity the sorrows of a poor old man!—to go straight on my less rheumatic knee, the right one, and offer you the devotion of the short remainder of an elderly life, as the man in the play says, as a substitute for youth, the absence of which no devotion could atone for, and the few fragments of a heart long since torn in pieces by a succession of beautiful and gracious girls, if those fragments are worth picking up; but, indeed, they are not.

"I wish I could be sitting with you in your own room, overlooking Weyland Park. I should come disguised as Cupid; I should bring bow and arrow, and when Alan came along with his long face as full of care as if he were a married pauper, I should let him have a shaft full in the place where his heart ought to be; but I don't think he has one.

"Good-bye, my dear Miranda. You know that I am always as actively devoted to your service as age and rheumatism will allow. Write me a long letter, and tell me everything.

"A. F."

CHAPTER VI.

MIRANDA wrote in reply almost by return of post.

"DEAR LORD ALWYNE,

"A thousand thanks for your letter. I wish I had a great many more lovers like yourself, as devoted and as unselfish. It is very delightful to have some one to say kind things and make one vain. I wonder if it is as pleasant for you to say them as it is for girls to hear them said. Come down and stay with us if you can make up your mind to a dull house, and only me for a companion. You shall sit in my room all day long if you like, and look out over Weyland Park, which is very beautiful just now; I think the place grows more beautiful every year. But I will not consent to disguises either as Cupid or anything else, and I will accept your devotion without any kneeling.

"It really was a delightful day that we had together on the river last year, and we must try for another. Only no pleasure seems able to be repeated exactly in the same way. If we were to go there again it would probably rain, or I might be in a bad temper.

"Alan came to see us as soon as he arrived. I saw him marching across the park, and I will confess to you that I took my opera-glasses in order to have a good look at him, while he was yet afar off. His shoulders have broadened out, and he walks more upright. He has lost that stoop which used to make him look as if he was always working out a difficult problem. I think his beard improves him, somehow; though you do not wear a beard, it makes him look more like you. His eyes, as he walked over the turf, had a far-off look, just as they used to before he went to Oxford, and was always dreaming about the future. So I saw he was back again in the world of imagination, and not thinking of me at all. To you, because Alan and I are and always will be brother and sister, I may confess that I think this brown-bearded man with blue eyes the handsomest man I have ever seen, as he is the most gentle and the most disinterested.

"When I thought he might be near enough to see me with my glasses, I put them down and went out to meet him. He was as glad to greet me as I was to greet him, I think.

"It was six o'clock. Mamma was well enough to dine with us—it was one of her better days, fortunately. We had a talk in the garden before dinner, and after dinner a long talk, he and I alone.

"Your son is greatly changed, Lord Alwyne; in some respects completely changed. He looks at everything from a new point of view, and I can see that he has been thinking and studying during the whole of his two years' travel.

"All the old schemes are to be abandoned, and an entirely new plan adopted. I confess that at first I was amazed at his scheme, but I am beginning to believe that it is not only noble, but also feasible. It is, to put it in as few words as possible, this : There is to be no more lecturing and teaching. That, he says, is proved by experience to be useless. Any one can point the way like a sign-post ; any one can stand on a hill and cry out to the people below to climb up if they can as he has done ; any one can write books full of precious thoughts, if he have them himself ; but you cannot always persuade people to read them. The lower classes, he says, all over the world are exactly alike, except in the United States. They will neither read, listen, nor see, with understanding. They are slaves, not to laws, which touch them very little, but to habit and custom. The only way, therefore, to improve the masses, is to break down the slavery of habit."

When Lord Alwyne—he was reading this letter at breakfast—got as far as this, he put it down, and heaved a sigh.

"I asked her to bring him to common-sense, and he has inoculated her. Habit and custom ? And a very good thing for the people too. Let their customs be cleanly, their habits pleasant for other people, and their manners civil. What more does the boy want ? Rigmarole !"

"I am sure you will agree with Alan so far. In fact, all this is preliminary."

"Yes," said Lord Alwyne. "I knew that something more was coming."

"How then, asks Alan, is the task of substituting culture and inquiry for sluggish habit to be undertaken ? There is, he says, but one way. By example. He will come down from his high place, descend to their levels, work with them, eat with them, live with them, and endeavour to set the example of the higher life, and to show how that is possible even with the surroundings of a cottage, and the pay of a farm labourer.

> "'Not what we give, but what we share :
> For the gift without the giver is bare.'"

"The Devil !" This was the reader's interruption. "Now those two will go on fooling the rustics, till they make the whole country-side intolerable."

"I cannot say," continued Miranda in the letter, "how much I admire a man who gives himself. That is so much higher a thing—so much nobler—than to give money."

"If they had my money," said Lord Alwyne, "they might have me with it too, for all I should care. Certainly I should not be of much use without it. Go on, my dear Miranda. It is pleasant talking over a breakfast-table."

"It is like going out to fight for your country."

"Worse," murmured the reader. "Much worse. I've done that, and I ought to know. Except for the trenches, it wasn't bad fun. And at least one didn't live with rustics."

"Or it is giving up all that one has been accustomed to consider bare necessities: abandoning for a time the gentle life."

"I am glad it is only for a time. And I hope," said Lord Alwyne, "that it will be for a very short time."

"And it is certainly exposing one's self to the misrepresentation and ridicule of people who do not understand you; to unpopularity in the county——"

"Unpopularity indeed!" cried Lord Alwyne. "Now I hope to Heaven the boy will not meddle with the Game. Anything but that. And in such a county too!"

"And possible failure!"

"Ah! ha!" The reader laughed. "Possible failure! Ho! ho!"

"All these Alan will cheerfully face. He must have our support and sympathy, and we must wish him success.

"If you would like to hear more details of the plan——"

"I should not," said Lord Alwyne.

"Come down and stay with us. You might have Weyland Court all to yourself, and even sleep in the haunted room, if you prefer; but as Alan is entirely occupied with his plans, I think you would see little of him, and would be more comfortable with us."

"I most certainly should, my dear Miranda," said Lord Alwyne.

But he had to postpone his visit, because some one, who had a charming wife, who also had two charming sisters, proposed to him that he should join them, and all go to Egypt together, to escape the English winter. When he returned, it was at the beginning of the London season, and he had so many people to see that he could not possibly get away till July. Finally, it was not till Nelly Despard took the vows that he was able to get down to Weyland Court. And by that time Alan's experiment was a year old.

CHAPTER VII.

> "Yet have my thoughts for thee been vigilant,
> Bound to thy service with unceasing care."

As Miranda told Lord Alwyne, no time was lost in putting the new plans into execution.

"By actually living among the people," said Alan, with the calmness of conviction, "I shall in a short time succeed in persuading them to look upon me as one of themselves—a simple fellow-labourer, who has received a better education, and had greater advantages to start with. I suppose one cannot hope wholly to eradicate the feeling of caste. And for the present, that seems not quite desirable. It is well, until all have alike the same education, that the better educated, who are also the richer and the more cultivated, should be looked upon as the natural leaders."

"Surely, Alan," said Miranda, "you are by birth as well as education the natural leader of these people?"

"I think I am," he replied, with that far-off look in his blue eyes which belongs to the enthusiast. "I am certain I am; otherwise there would remain nothing but to sit down in indolent ease at Weyland Court, and live the ignoble life of the country squire."

That is what he called it: the enviable life where there are no duties, no daily mill, and no care for the yearly income, the life of the country gentleman—he called it "that ignoble life."

"It is a beautiful dream," said Miranda. "And, oh! Alan, I wish I could rise with you to the belief that the dream will ever become a reality. I want your enthusiasm as well as your self-devotion."

"It must—it will become a reality, Miranda," he answered, with a flush of conviction. "I have chanced upon the one thing wanting in all the old schemes. *They* directed, *we* lead; *they* instructed, *we* set the example. Our sports, our labours, our joys will be what theirs should be; as their life ought to be, so will we try to make ours. In externals, at least, we shall be on the same footing; as our habits will be, so ought theirs to be."

Miranda listened with kindling eyes. Her heart beat with sympathetic fire in the presence of this strong and brave nature which dared to follow out a line of its own—the line of right. And she sought in vain for examples in history of others who had thus practically and earnestly devoted themselves to the safety or regeneration of mankind. Marcus Curtius, a leading case, narrowed his self-sacrifice to patriotism; monks and nuns still further narrow theirs to the advantage of their own individual souls; curates and parsons, who work day and night among the slums, gladly exchange these retreats for the more congenial sphere of country livings; professional philanthropists not unfrequently exaggerate the pecuniary value of their services, and have even been known to help themselves secretly from the treasury: but that a man like Alan Dunlop, with everything at his hand which men crave for, should voluntarily resign them all, and become a labourer amongst labourers, without hope or prospect of reward, was a thing wholly without parallel.

They were talking in Miranda's own room at Dalmeny Hall, the place which the young heiress had daintily adorned to suit her own tastes. It was a room on the first floor, which overlooked Weyland Park. It had a south aspect, it was fitted and furnished with everything that is delicate, pretty, artistic, and delightful, from the pictures on the wall to the carpets and the chairs. The time was just before the establishment of the Abbey, when Alan spent most of his leisure-time discussing things at Dalmeny Hall with the fair chatelaine, who alone of mortals regarded his project with sympathy and interest. It was a retreat kept quiet by an invalid mother, and yet full of liberty to the few who, like Alan Dunlop, Tom Caledon, Desdemona Fanshawe (she had long resumed her maiden name), and others had the *entrée.* Alan believed the more strongly in his own theories when that fair face looked up in his, and he read in those steadfast eyes the loyal faith of recent conversion.

"A beautiful dream!" she repeated. "The dream of a noble mind. But, oh! Alan, I cannot bear to think of you breaking your heart against the rocks of ignorance and stupidity."

"Ignorance," he replied, "we can overcome: stupidity may be met with patience. What I fear most is habit. That is the greatest enemy of all progress."

"But how can you live at the Court and yet live as a labouring man?"

"I shall not live at the Court; I shall leave it, and take a house in the village."

"And never come out of it at all, Alan? Never come up here to see me? Not come and dine here, as you do now?"

He hesitated.

"What I want to do, Miranda, is to live in all respects as a labouring man may, upon his wages. If I come up here to dine, it would be a temptation in the way of luxury. I shall earn, I suppose, a pound or eighteen shillings a week. That will have to do for me. I think you must not ask me to dine here. But I will come up sometimes on Sunday mornings if you like, and report progress."

Miranda sighed. She was prepared to see her chief friend and adviser resign all—but herself. That was a practical outcome to the new theories of life which she had never contemplated. Life would be dull indeed without Alan Dunlop to enliven it.

The requisites of a prophet are, first, to believe in yourself; secondly, to believe in your theory; thirdly, to believe in your people. Alan Dunlop possessed all these requisites. As an English gentleman, he had the hereditary belief in himself, so that to stand in the front was, he felt, his proper place. He had retained this belief, and even strengthened it during the three years at Oxford, and subsequently while travelling round the world. He had thought so long over the duties which rise out of the responsibilities of wealth, that he was by this time as profoundly convinced of his mission as Moses or Mahomet; and, lastly, he had a firm belief in the latent power of the common people for imbibing new ideas presented in the right way.

"Could you, Miranda," he asked once, in half-hesitating tones, "could you too give up this atmosphere of delicate culture, and change it for that of village life among the villagers?"

"I could not, Alan," she replied frankly. "I love to read about noble things and self-sacrifice. It is one of the pleasures of life to feel one's heart glow over some glorious tale. But the details, when one comes to realise them—think of living among the labourers' wives——Oh, Alan!"

"No," he said, with a sigh, "I suppose you could not."

"Had he proposed to her and been refused?" she thought when he went away. "Surely she had not refused him?"

"*Il y a toujours un qui aime et un qui est aimé.*" There were once two children. One was a boy, and one was a girl. The boy, who was named Alan Fontaine, was three years older than the girl, who was called Miranda Dalmeny. Their houses were half a mile apart. The boy was born at Weyland Court and the girl at Dalmeny Hall. The former stood in a great park, the latter in nothing but its own gardens; but it overlooked Weyland Park; and the property belonging to its owner was almost as great as that enjoyed by Lord Alwyne Fontaine in right of his wife. Both owners, Alan's mother and Miranda's father, died. The boy and girl became heir and heiress. Alan Fontaine became Alan Dunlop, and for miles on either side of Weyland Park the broad acres of their lands marched side by side.

They grew up together, shared the same sympathies, had the same vague yearnings for that glorious future which is the dream of generous youth, when all noble things seem possible, and we are as yet but dimly conscious of that heritage of evil which, like Setebos, troubles all. They communicated their thoughts to each other, dwelling always on the plans of the after years. They read in the great library of Weyland Court strange old books which filled their minds with thoughts, not of the nineteenth century; and they rode about the country together, this new Paul with a new Virginia, talking, thinking, and dreaming poetry, sentiment, and enthusiasm.

When Miranda was eighteen Alan was twenty-one, and just returning from Oxford. By this time the girl had, after the fashion of her sex at that age, left off telling her thoughts, and kept them locked up in her own brain, waiting and accumulating until the arrival of the man with a right to them. Alan, as men will, went on telling his.

After his unsuccessful attempt to improve the village by lectures, Alan went away on his journey round the world. It was, at first, very dull for Miranda at the Hall. Then Lord Alwyne persuaded Desdemona to go and stay with her as a sort of companion, and she went to town for the season, which was a diversion. At least, it would have been a diversion but for one thing. Her beauty, which was considerable, was naturally enhanced and set off by her income. A girl whose rent-roll is told by thousands is an object of general interest in herself, even if she has a face like a door-knocker. And at first it went to her heart to refuse the young men, who took every opportunity, in conservatories, at dinner-tables, in the park, at garden-parties, at balls, and even in church, to offer their hands and hearts. They were so deeply in earnest, they felt so profoundly the enormous advantages of hanging up their hats in Dalmeny Hall, they had a respect so unfeigned for the beauty, the intellect, the desirable qualities of the girl who owned so splendid a property, that poor Miranda felt guilty with shame to herself for being so insensible, when they stammered forth the customary words and she had to send them away sorrowful. But when they came in swarms, when the memory of Impecuniosus the First, dismissed with sorrow and some sort of shame, was driven away by the advent of Impecuniosus the Forty-First; when she had learned all the various methods pursued by men who propose, and experience had taught her the best form of refusal, viz., that which leaves no room for hope, she ceased to pity her suitors, and even began to ridicule them to Desdemona and Lord Alwyne: grew hard-hearted, cut short the aspirant at the very first words, and sent him away without expressing the least sympathy. Everybody knew and everybody said, that her heart was given to Alan Dunlop, the queer, wild enthusiast of Oxford, who headed the road-makers. Certain it is that her happiest days were those when, from some far-off foreign place, a letter came to her in the well-known handwriting. And equally certain it is that wherever she went, there was always present the youthful form and face of Lord Alwyne, warding off the undesirable *partis*, protecting his ward against the wiles of the impecunious.

In the fulness of time Alan came home rich with the spoils of all the world. There was no word of love between them before he went away. Among the many hundred letters he wrote from various habitable points upon this sphere, there was no word of love; and when he came back, there was again no word of love. Miranda said that Alan was a brother to her. Probably Alan might have thought much in the same way of Miranda, with the difference, however, that the fondest brother contemplates the possibility of his sister's marriage without a pang, while Alan never for a moment imagined how he could get on without her.

Had she actually refused him? A burning spot rose in either cheek as she thought this over. But no; she remembered all her wooers and their ways. She recalled the signs, which she knew too well, of an intention to propose. They were alike in substance, though they differed in detail. There was the ardent but diffident young clerk in the Foreign Office, who laid himself with pitiful abasement at her feet, and there was the proud and penniless peer who confidently proposed the exchange of a title for a rent-roll. But in Alan's question there was nothing of all this; neither doubt nor anxiety, nor emotion of any kind—only a plain question.

To live among the wives and daughters of the labourers! Could she do this? Not even, she felt, for that which Lord Alwyne had told her in the boat under the Clieveden woods was the one thing which he hoped for his son. Dear old Lord Alwyne! always so kind and thoughtful. And, oh! so very fond of saying pretty things to pretty girls. Other pretty girls, Miranda thought, with a little pang of jealousy, would have those pretty things said to them. And what would become of Alan's self-sacrifice? Would that go on all his life? Was he to be separated from her by half a mile of park and village, and yet to belong to her no more?

As for Alan himself, he was far indeed from asking for Miranda's hand. There had occurred to him for a moment only a beatific vision, in which he and Miranda—brother and sister labourer—should be living in the village among "the people," belonging to them: he to the men, and she to the women, so that while he introduced new ideas and combated old habits among one sex, she might be among the others, inculcating the arts of cleanliness, order, good temper, or the rudiments of that sweet culture which, in a very few years' time, was to make a home of delight in every cottage, and to form a West-end club, except for the drink and luxurious living, and the cigars and the easy-chairs, in every village. But the vision was momentary. It faded before Miranda's resolute reply, and he walked away sorrowful. He would have to fight the battle single-handed.

Among the farms on his estate was one of three hundred acres, leased by a certain Stephen Bostock. It was the smallest—it was the lowest-rented, the least productive, and the tenants were the least satisfactory of any upon his estate. He went to Stephen Bostock himself. He pointed out, having ascertained these facts from his agent, that he, Stephen Bostock, was getting deeper every year in the mire, that he had no money, that things were certain to get worse with him instead of better, and then he asked him what he proposed to do.

Stephen Bostock was a man with a very red face, as many rustics have, and a very long, square chin, as few rustics have. The red face was due to habitual intemperance, whenever he could find the money; the long, square chin was a mark and a certain proof of cunning, obstinacy, and self-reliance. A long chin means tenacity—a square chin means resource. When you get them both together, you have such a man as Stephen Bostock.

Stephen Bostock was between forty and fifty years of age. He who has made no money at fifty never will make any. That is why a man of forty-five who has made none begins to grow anxious. Stephen Bostock had nothing in the world except the lease of a farm whose rent he could not pay, a dairy whose proceeds kept the house supplied with meat and drink, and a wife and daughter who looked after the dairy, kept chickens and ducks, and saw that the pigs were fed. He was a small tenant-farmer, one of the most hopeless class, rapidly becoming rarer, in this realm of England. If the land were their own, they could live on it, thrive on it, work on it, and be happy. But it is not, and so the class deteriorates, starves for a while, becomes bankrupt, either sinks back to the soil, or goes to

Canada, where free-lands can be taken up, and men become at a stroke yeomen, after the fashion of their ancestors.

"You see, Bostock," said Alan, "things seem getting worse instead of better with you."

"Yes, sir," he replied, "they certainly be. A little ease in the rent, now, might make everything right."

"No, it would not," Alan went on; "nothing will make everything right with you. The land is suffering from starvation and neglect. You have no stock, and next to no horses. You have got through all your money, whatever that was, and nothing can save you."

"A good spell o' rainy weather," began Stephen, his mind turning feebly in the direction of turnips.

"No, no," said the Squire. "Now listen to me, Bostock. Suppose I were to take the lease off your hands—don't speak, but listen. Suppose I were to offer you to remain where you are, in your own house, not as tenant of the farm, but its bailiff, on a salary?"

"Oh!" said Stephen, startled, "on a celery" (he pronounced it so), "and in my own house! Without rent? As bailiff! Ah!"

"On a salary to be fixed between us." (Stephen resolved that, if it depended on him, it should be fixed pretty high.) "And that you should look after the practical business of the farm, which I intend to work on my own plans: that you should faithfully fulfil your part of the contract; that is, buy and sell, arrange the rotation of the crops, and direct the labour of the farm, to the best advantage of the proprietor, exactly as if it was your own."

Here Stephen Bostock, who began by staring hard, comprehended the position, and that so suddenly, that he was compelled to produce a red cotton handkerchief to hide a grin which, despite every warning of politeness, *would* spread from ear to ear.

"A celery; manage the farm for the Squire; go on living in the house, rent-free; buy and sell for the best advantage—ho! ho!—for the best advantage of the farm."

It really was too much.

Was it real?

Yes; before him stood the young Squire with grave and resolute face, square brows, and solemn blue eyes—eyes which somehow took the grin out of the corners of his mouth, and enabled him to lay down the pocket-handkerchief.

"Let me hear it all over again," he said. "I'm slow by nature, but I'm sure. I am to live, rent free"—that was his own addition—"in the farmhouse. That's the first thing. I'm slow, but when I tackle a thing, I do tackle that thing. I am to sell the lease for a consideration." That was also his own addition.

"Not at all," said Alan. "You will not sell the lease; you will give it to me, to escape bankruptcy."

Mr. Bostock made a face. Nobody likes the ugly word bankruptcy.

"Well," he said, "you will have your joke, Mr. Dunlop. We'll say that I surrender the lease, not sell it. But I am to get something, I suppose. I am to give up the lease, am I? And then I am to be bailiff. On a celery. And what might be your opinion of the celery that I should be worth as bailiff to this farm?"

"I have hardly thought about it," said Alan. Of course, a hundred a year would have been plenty for such a man. "But we might begin with two hundred."

"*And* fifty, if *you* please, Mr. Dunlop," said Mr. Bostock firmly. "And then we shall be going dirt-cheap—dirt-cheap. Two hundred and fifty, or three hundred. I think I ought to say a celery of four hundred. But, knowing you and your family as I do know you and your family, and having been a tenant for a many years, and my wife once lady's-maid to her ladyship, and all, makes one inclined to cut down the figure."

"We will say, then, two hundred and fifty," said Alan. He was accustomed to make this sort of compromise, and thought it showed the prudence of a business man. The other contractor to an agreement, for instance, whoever he was, invariably asked him for three times what he ought to have demanded. Alan conceded twice, and congratulated himself on having shown extraordinary knowledge of the world. Then he offered the wily Bostock two hundred and fifty, when he might have got him for a hundred.

"Well," Bostock grumbled, "to please you, sir. But we must have the dairy, and a field for the cows and the fowls, and the pigs, and the orchard, jest as at present so arranged."

"You can have all those," said Alan, ignorantly adding another hundred to the new bailiff's salary.

"That," said Bostock, "won't make the celery none too high. Besides, the dairy and the pigs is a mere nothink. But there—And when will you begin, sir?"

"As soon as I can," said Alan. "I am going"—here he hesitated a little—"to manage this farm on an entirely new principle, of which I will explain the details afterwards. That is, you will manage it, but the results of the farm—the profits—are to be applied on a new principle."

"I thought, sir," said Bostock—his face lengthened considerably at the prospect of the farm being managed on new principles—"I thought that I was to buy and to sell for the best advantage of the farm."

"Why, so you are. That is not what I mean."

"Oh!" said Bostock, relieved; "that is not what you mean, sir?"

"Not at all. You will really buy, sell, and do everything. You will be the responsible manager of the farm. The profits, however, deducting your salary first, and the necessary expenses of wages, stock, implements, and so forth, will be divided in certain proportions between myself and the farm labourers and you, as the bailiff."

Once more Mr. Bostock was obliged to take out that pocket-handkerchief, with which he blew his nose violently, choked, became crimson in the face, blew his nose again, choked again, and finally, resumed his calm.

"Oh!" he said; "the profits of the farm, after paying me, the bailiff, and the wages and the necessary expenses, will go to us all in proper proportions, will they? Well, sir, that's a most generous and liberal offer on your part. I don't think there's another Squire in all the country, as knows land as you know land—because you've been round the world and must know all the land as is fit to call itself land—no, not a single other Squire alive as would make that proposal. Mr. Dunlop, I'm with you, and if you'll shake the hand of a honest man"—he held out his horny paw—"there you are."

Alan took it, almost with tears.

"I believe you will serve the farm honestly and well, Bostock," he said.

"I will, sir," replied the new bailiff. "Look round you and see the improvements I've made already with my small means. Why am I a poor man now, and my neighbours rich? Because I put into that land what they take out of it. Look at the farm implements—you'll buy them at a valuation, of course; I'll value them for you. Look at the horses and the stock, look at the machines, look at the fields. People come—ah! for miles round—to visit this farm. It's been in print. Bostock's Farm, they call it. And after all these years, there's the rent unpaid, and—I'm not ashamed to say it, because the money's in the land, not in the bank—I go out of it, and become the bailiff at a salary of two hundred and fifty, paid weekly, which is five pounds a week, and a house rent-free, and the dairy and a field for the cows, and the pigs, and the orchard, and the farm stock at my valuation. Squire, you've got me dirt-cheap. I don't grudge the bargain, because my heart's in the work, and I shall have no more trouble about rent, and give my whole mind to the farm. You'll have to spend a little money on the place," he added, waving his hands with the air of one who commands. "But, Lord! it will all come back to you. Only you wait till we've been at work for a year or so. A little money here and a little there, a steam-engine here and another there. More cattle, more horses. Mr. Dunlop, I believe," he cried in a burst of enthusiasm, "I believe you'll say, come this day five years, that you never did a better stroke of work in all your life than when you got ME, Stephen Bostock, to be your bailiff, dirt-cheap. It isn't for me to say who's the best man in all the county. Go to Athelston and ask at the farmers' ordinary on market-day. And all I've got to say is—here am I, at your service. Trust everything to me; let me, Stephen Bostock, buy and sell all by myself for the best advantage of the farm, as you say, Mr. Dunlop, and no questions asked, nor interference, nor anything, and—and then wait for the profits to be divided between you and me and the labourers. It's the labourers," he added, after a pause, "that I think on most, not myself, nor you. You've got your rents, Mr. Dunlop. You're a gentleman. I've got my salary—on'y two hundred and fifty, but 'sufficient is enough to a contented mind, and better is a stalled ox with contentment than a dinner of herbs and strife therewith.' But they pore labourers, they've got nothing, only their wages. Well, sir, we'll make it up to them. You and me together, we will."

There was something contagious in the hearty, though vulgar, enthusiasm of the new bailiff, and Alan shook hands with him with effusion. When the Squire was gone, the bailiff, after watching him carefully across a field and a half, sat down and resumed openly that broad grin which he had before concealed behind the handkerchief.

"Me to buy and sell," he said. "*And* the two hundred and fifty! *And* rent free! *And* the dairy! *And* the pigs! *And* the cows! And all to the best advantage of the farm. Dammit, it's fine!" he said this critically. "That's what it is—it's fine." He lay back, and laughed low and long. Then a sudden thought pierced the marrow of his heart, and he sat up again.

"How long will it last? One year? Two years? Stephen Bostock, my lad, make hay while the sun shines. Buy and sell as much as you can to the best advantage. Ho! ho!—the best advantage—ha! ha!—of the farmer—ho! ho!—and the labourers—ha! ha!—the labourers! Yar!" He added the last words with the most profound contempt, which it was as well that Alan did not witness.

CHAPTER VIII.

"That monster, Custom, who all sense doth eat."

AFTER this gratifying interview with Farmer Bostock, Alan felt himself warranted in at once proceeding to business. Pending the signing of the agreement, which the honest bailiff undertook to get drawn up, he began by inviting the labourers on the farm to meet him on Saturday evening at the schools, when, after supper, he proposed to set forth in simple language, cautiously abstaining from eloquence or metaphor, his scheme for the advance of the higher civilisation.

The men were invited to bring their wives, and those of the women whose family ties allowed, accepted with as much readiness as the men. Here, it was felt, was a distinct step in advance. On the last occasion when the Squire met them in the schoolroom, he offered them a lecture, and never so much as a glass of beer to wash it down. Now, whatever suffering might be in store for them in the way of speeches, one thing was quite clear, that there would be compensation in the way of meat and drink. The butcher and the landlord of the Spotted Lion, indeed, were ready to state what amount of compensation.

"The supper," said one of the group in the Spotted Lion, on Friday evening, "is roast beef, and roast mutton, hot, with potatoes and cabbage."

"Ah!" from all lips sympathetically.

"And beer. As much beer as we like. None o' your half-pints with young Squire. I seen the Squire's orders in writing."

"Ah!"—unanimously.

"Seems a kind of a waste now, don't it?" asked a venerable sage, smoking in the corner. "Saturday night an' all. Might ha' bin here as usual, and had the beer to ourselves, and kep' the beef for Sunday."

That was true, and feelingly put.

"And there's a lecture, William?" the ancient sage went on. "Same as two year ago."

"Ay. There's a lecture. But, Lord! after the beef—and the cabbage—and the beer—what's a lecture?"

Alan presided at the supper, supported by the Vicar on his right, and his new bailiff on the left. When every one had eaten as much beef as he possibly could, and the cloth was removed, the men were agreeably surprised by the production of pipes, tobacco, and more beer. The place, to be sure, was not what they were accustomed to for smoking purposes, and the tobacco did not possess some of the qualities which they preferred; but there was always the beer.

The women began to steal away when the pipes were lit, and by the time the room was quite full of smoke and the Squire was choking, there were none but men present. Then Alan rose to make the speech which inaugurated his co-operative farm.

He saw with a sinking heart that they immediately assumed the attitude which long custom at church made them put on for the reception of a discourse. That is to say, they leaned back in their chairs, left off talking—some of them put down their pipes out of respect—and with eyes fixed upon the rafters, allowed their thoughts to wander in pleasant fields. There was, to be sure, a freshness in being allowed to drink beer and smoke during a sermon.

"My friends—" Here there was a general shuffling of legs, as every man helped himself hastily to another glass of gratuitous beer, the idea emanating from the aged philosopher. It might be—it would certainly be—their last that evening, because no doubt when the sermon was finished they would all be dismissed with the benediction given, so to speak, dry, as on Sunday.

"My friends—" Alan gave them time to recover and began again. "I have asked you here to-night, not, as happened two years ago, to deliver a lecture, but to ask your advice." He paused here, and looked round, but on no single face did he discern the least gleam or glimmer of interest. Every man's eyes were steadily fixed on the roof, and every man was quietly but resolutely smoking, his mind, of course, in some more congenial place.

This was disheartening. Alan tried again.

"My friends," he said once more, "I want to ask your advice I stand among you the owner of this land, and the receiver of its rents."

"Hear! hear!" cried Mr. Bostock; and at an interruption so uncommon in a sermon, many of the hearers recovered consciousness suddenly, and found themselves not in church at all, but in the schoolroom. Then they realised the position, and relapsed again.

"An owner of land and a receiver of rents," Alan went on, "occupies a position which, I believe, is only beginning to be generally recognised. He incurs responsibilities, in fact, of the most serious kind."

He paused again. There was no gleam of sympathy in any single eye. But that might be the effect of the tobacco haze.

"The conditions of agriculture are, in this country," he went on, "very different to those in any of the places I have visited. In all countries except England, men farm their own land. Mostly, they farm it with their own hands. Here we have not only the owner, a man of capital, but also the tenant farmer, another man of capital, to come between the labourer and the profits of his labour. That is a state of things which we cannot entirely alter, but may modify."

He stopped again. A low and melodious snore from the end of the table where one of the younger members had fallen asleep, increased his auditors' belief that they were really in church.

"An owner of land in England," Alan continued, "is a trustee; he is a responsible agent; he holds a large part of the public welfare in his hands. It is his duty to leave no stone unturned in the effort to secure the largest amount of happiness attainable by the general mass of mankind."

He thought that short sentences, delivered slowly, would have the effect of arresting the attention, and though the entire silence (except the single snore) and apparent apathy with which his words had hitherto been received were disheartening, yet he hoped that when he got through his preamble the men would receive his intentions with enthusiasm.

"I start, therefore, with the grand modern principle that labour must be paid a sufficient wage to keep the labourer and his family in health. So far, no doubt, you are all agreed."

Not a soul made the slightest response.

"Next, I advance the grand new principle in social economy that the labourers in any enterprise are entitled, in addition to their wages, to a share in the profits."

"Hear! hear!" from Mr. Bostock, which brought down the upward-turned faces. When, however, they found that the sermon was not finished, the faces all went up again.

"I am about to ask your assistance," Alan went on, "in the establishment of a farm conducted on these and other new principles. I have taken the farm previously held by our friend Mr. Bostock, and have undertaken to put the general management into his hands as bailiff. The details of this management I leave to you for settlement among yourselves."

"Hear! hear!" from Mr. Bostock.

The faces came down again, and looked wonderingly around them. They were all lost in the sleepy imaginations which belong to sermon-time: they were full of fat mutton and heavy beer: they were not—then—in church: and there was the Squire boomin' away. What was it all about?

"I propose that you hold a weekly Parliament in this room, every Saturday night, for the discussion of all and every topic connected with the farm. You will understand that on your own decisions will rest the prosperity of the undertaking and your own chances of profit.

"As regards the profits of the farm, I shall take for my own share a percentage to represent five per cent. on the marketable value: the bailiff will receive a salary of two hundred and fifty pounds: your own wages will, of course, have to come out of the annual returns: there will be a percentage set aside for wear and tear of farm implements: and then—then—my friends, we shall divide between us all the remaining profits. I, as the landlord, will take a certain share; the bailiff, as superior officer and manager, his share: the rest will be divided among you equally."

There was not the slightest enthusiasm—not the least response; all the faces turned swiftly upwards contemplating the rafters—everybody silent out of respect. You don't interrupt a parson in a pulpit by singing out "Hear! hear!" or any such foolishness. Not at all—you sit and listen, and when he has done you go away. As for what he has said, that is his affair, not yours.

Alan was a good deal disappointed, but he persevered.

"You will elect your own officers, appoint your own hours of labour, provide for everything by free discussion and voting. For my own part," here he sank his voice and spoke solemnly, because this was the real pith and gist of the whole thing. "I shall ask you to let me become one of yourselves, work with you, eat and drink with you, share your toil as well as your recreation, and contribute from the better chances I have had of acquiring knowledge all I can that may be helpful to the new community."

The faces came down when the voice dropped, because it was thus that the Vicar always ended his sermons. So that all heard the Squire, to their unspeakable astonishment, offering to live with them, work with them, and eat and drink with them.

"Finally," he said, "I think, considering the advantages that we possess: a bailiff who takes a salary instead of a profit" – here Stephen Bostock pulled out his pocket-handkerchief to conceal the grin which once more involuntarily played round his honest lips—"a landlord who wants no more than a small percentage on the value of the farm, and a knot of hard-working, disciplined, and—and—intelligent men like yourselves—I think, I say, that we may begin by raising the wages three shillings all round."

Here the Squire sat down, and the men stared at him.

Three shillings all round. That they understood, and the fact, once fairly understood, sent their dull blood coursing more swiftly through their veins. Three shillings a week! Eighteen pints of beer! But the possibilities of such an increase cannot be grasped in a moment.

Alan rose again when the emotion had subsided, and pulled out a small bundle of papers. They were fly-leaves, on which the principal points of his speech had been printed in clear type and in a few words. He put them upon the table.

"Now," he said, "let this be the first evening Parliament of the new community! I leave these papers with you, so that you may understand, by reading them, exactly what it is that I propose, by your help, to institute. We shall now leave you to your deliberations. Pray send for any more beer that you may require."

The Vicar, Mr. Bostock, and the Squire gone, the men, alone and comfortable, looked at each other with mazed and turbid understandings.

"What did he say, William?" asked the same old sage who had lamented the loss of a Saturday night and the waste of good beef.

"Three shillin' a week," replied William. "And the Squire, he'll come and live along of us."

"We don't want no Squire," growled the blacksmith.

"And Farmer Bostock he's to be bailiff."

There was another growl.

Then William, a young man, spoke again.

"Squire said we was to have what beer we wanted. How much do we want?"

One suggested a pint all round; another, and a thirstier, rose to a pint and a half. There were about fifteen men present. William, with a boldness which marked him out for future success, soared higher.

"Let's hev' a cask," he said.

As there were fifteen men present, that was about three quarts apiece. The cask was brought, and instantly tapped. The deliberations were conducted as long as it lasted, which was at least three hours.

No conclusions were arrived at. But the imagination was let loose upon the Squire's future manner of life, and how his father would like it.

"William," presently asked the old man, "they papers as the Squire left on the table. What's they for?"

"Pipe-lights, gaffer," replied William promptly.

"Oh! and very thoughtful of the Squire, too. Reach me one, William!"

This, alas! was the end of the Squire's little tract.

CHAPTER IX.

"Strong reasons make strong actions."

THE cottage in which Alan proposed to carry out his project was one of the humblest in the village. It consisted of two rooms; that on the ground-floor opening directly on the little front garden, and paved with stone, was ten feet square and eight feet high. That on the floor above was of the same superficial area, but had a sloping roof, so that the cubical contents were much smaller. In fact, it was a room in which a man would hesitate to swing a cat, from the dreadful uncertainty whether the cat might not clutch the walls and turn to rend him. The room was lighted by a small window containing two panes only.

"You must have a curtain across the door, Alan," said Miranda, inspecting the arrangements. "I will make it for you of some cheap stuff, so that it may be copied by the village. A flower-box may be put in the window for mignonette and wallflowers. You may put a little bookcase opposite the window. And, for very comfort's sake, you must have some carpet over the cold stones. I can't very well send you blankets at Christmas, Alan, can I? Let me send you a piece of carpet instead—oh! good serviceable carpet; Kidderminster, not Turkey carpet at all."

"I have been thinking," said Alan, "that one way of getting to understand these people, will be by asking them here and giving them tea, with—with jam, I suppose, and so forth."

It was not till she was alone that Miranda felt a temptation to laugh over the picture of the peasants eating their way to the Higher Culture through piles of jam. They agreed that, as regards the furniture, simplicity must be studied first, and that æsthetic effect must be practically made of secondary importance. They fixed upon a wooden arm-chair, a deal table, unvarnished, and two or three common strong chairs for the coming visitors who were to eat jam. The bookcase presented difficulties. Should it be fitted for the use of the village, or for that of the Squire? It was with a sigh that Alan pronounced for the village, and filled it with works on practical husbandry, political economy, agricultural chemistry, and other works known to be in constant demand by English villagers.

"I must devote my evenings, as well as my days, Miranda," said Alan, on the eve of taking up his residence in the village, "to the people. But I shall be able to see you on Sundays."

"And, Alan, may I come to see you—in the fields?"

Alan laughed.

"You may, if you like. You will find me in a smock-frock."

"A smock-frock? You, Alan?"

Somehow the question of dress goes home to the feminine mind with greater force and directness than to ourselves. Miranda would have preferred seeing her new Crusader cap-à-pié in chain armour. But in a smock-frock!

Alan laughed.

"The uniform came home last night," he said. "In the solitude of my own chamber I put it on. Stay, Miranda. No one is about. Suppose I go and put it on again for you."

He disappeared for a few minutes, and presently returned, disguised as a British labourer. He had on a smock-frock, a soft felt hat, leggings, gaiters, and corduroy trousers. He carried a whip in his hand, and wore a red cotton handkerchief tied 'round his neck. No one knows until he has tried it, how vast a gulf separates those who wear from those who do not wear a collar.

"Alan!" cried Miranda, in a sort of terror, "I am afraid of you. Is it possible for clothes to make all that difference? You look *exactly* like a rustic. Even your own air of distinction, that I was proud of, has disappeared. I believe clothes are live things, after all. To be sure, everything is new, and if you only had a rose in your buttonhole, you would pass for a villager at the opera. But go away quickly, and change before any of the servants see you. If they do, your authority is lost."

Alan took possession of his new house with pride mixed with anxiety. Like all genuine enthusiasts, he had very little care about what people said of him. That did not enter into his calculations. The pride arose from the realisation of a dream which had lain in his brain for two years and more; the anxiety from a fear that he might not be strong enough to carry it out. A woman whom he had engaged to wait upon him was in the cottage to receive him.

"You have got everything as I ordered?" Alan asked. "Breakfast such as the men all take; things for luncheon—I mean dinner?"

Everything, she said, had been provided. Thus assured, Alan dismissed her.

It was eight o'clock, and a cold rainy evening in October. The fire was burning, and the room was illuminated by a single tallow candle in a brass candlestick. The village was very quiet, and the rain fell outside, pattering upon his doorstep, cheerless. The sensation of being quite alone in a house, even a two-roomed cottage, was chilly. And there was the voluntary deprivation of tobacco, which was to begin from that evening. Abstinence from strong drinks, too, was to commence on the spot. Alan sat and meditated. He tried to picture to himself a village where the people were all cultured, all virtuous, all happy. He tried to lay down for himself laws to guide his conversation with the men, his daily toil, and his evenings. But it was an unpropitious time. For the moment he took no joy in his projects. In all undertakings of difficulty, that moment is the most unhappy when it has been resolved upon, and on the eve of commencement, because then the dangers stare you most clearly in the face, and success seems most doubtful.

Ten o'clock. He was to rise early, and had better go to bed. He climbed the narrow stairs, bumped his head once or twice against the sloping roof, and went to bed, feeling exactly like

Alexander Selkirk. He woke in the night choked with the confined air of the little room. It was dark; he had no matches, and could not open the window. With the aid of a brush he smashed a pane of glass, and having thus established a simple ventilator, went to bed again.

He awoke at six, an hour late. Then a touch of human weakness seized him. He would not begin his farm-work that day. Next day he would be called in time. And he thought, as he was awake, he would get up. No one to bring him hot water, no hot water to bring; no use in ringing the bell, no bell to ring. He felt more and more like Alexander Selkirk. Alas! he reflected, no fire lit, and breakfast to be made by himself.

Downstairs, he threw open the shutter and began, with a foolish shame lest any one should see him—to be sure it was not an occupation which offers, at the first blush, many attractions—to lay the fire. This is not difficult to do, but it requires delicacy in the handling, and there are certain details, such as the sweeping up of the cinders, which, although a part of honourable labour, is not the work one would wish to do in public. You have to go on your knees to do it properly; no man likes that kind of attitude, unless he is at Wimbledon. The fire kindled, it was necessary to boil the kettle for breakfast. Fortunately, the kettle was full. He had only, therefore, to put it on, lay out the things for breakfast, and take that meal.

When the fire was lit, he began to feel in better spirits. Of course there would be hardships. That was to be expected. Many sorts of hardships. For instance, was not there a certain —hem! an earthiness, a mouldy odour about the room, which he had failed to notice the night before? Perhaps, if he opened the door—he did so; outside the rain was still pattering on his doorstep, and standing in great pools about the road. Clay soil, stone floor, ground heavy with rain—these were the generators of his mouldiness. He made a mental note anent foundations. Good; the kettle must be nearly boiling now; let us set out breakfast.

No table-cloth; bread—where is the butter? where is the milk; tea; the teapot; the sugar—brown sugar. Nothing else? no bacon? no kidneys? nothing else at all? Do labourers make their breakfast off bread and tea, with brown sugar, and no milk? Stay. In the corner there is something white lying on a plate. He set this down on the table and contemplated it with dismay.

Yet he had pledged himself to live like the farm labourers.

A piece of cold boiled pork, only the fat, not a morsel of lean —a lump of white, hard, unredeemed fat. Do our agricultural workmen, then, habitually devour the fat of pigs?

He took up a knife and fork, resolved to conquer this luxurious distaste for pork fat. He laid it down. Again, and with the same result.

Then he sighed. At what a price must his end be attained! Perhaps the kettle was boiling. There were none of the signs —no bubbling and running over. He poured a little into a cup. Heavens! it was hardly warm. He sat down with some temper; not the broad facts of disinterested devotion, but these little details worry and annoy one.

He drew his chair to the side of the fire. If he kept the door open he would catch cold; if he shut it there was that abominable mouldiness. Patience. Let the kettle boil.

The warmth of the fire, the early hour, the exertion of laying the fire, each of these influences falling singly and together upon him, presently caused his eyes to close.

The fire having made the kettle to boil, went on, in its zeal to do the work thoroughly, until it had boiled all the water away. Then it got the opportunity, which it never neglects, of burning a hole in the bottom of the kettle. By-and-by the door, which was unfastened, swung gently open, and the rain began to beat in upon Alan's new carpet. Then a cat, belonging to a neighbouring cottage, crept in softly, and sat down before the fire, pretending to have made a mistake about the house. As the sleeper took no notice, she rose and began slowly to explore the room in quest of breakfast for herself, if any were to be had. Nothing in the cupboard, nothing on the floor. On the table a piece of pork fat and a loaf of bread. The cat turned the pork over with her paws, smelt it, and finally, digging her teeth into a corner of the skin, jumped lightly to the ground with it and disappeared. But Alan went on sleeping.

Then two little boys, of three and four, looked in at the door. I do not know where they came from, but realising the situation —somebody sound asleep, rain and cold outside—they crept in and sat on the carpet before the fire, warming their hands and feet. Presently one of them, the more enterprising one, began to prowl round the room, and espied a sugar-basin. This he stealthily brought to his companion, and both, sitting down before the fire, fell to upon the sugar, each keeping one eye on the sleeper, without the necessity of speech. When the sugar was quite gone, they gently rose, replaced the empty basin, and crept away on the points of their toes like stage brigands. But still the sleeping man slept on.

When the children were gone, the rain and wind beat in at the open door at their will without awakening the sleeper. Alan was in the land of dreams.

Then there came along the street an old woman. She was going to buy a loaf. Seeing the door of the cottage open, she looked in, with the curiosity of her sex, to see how the young

Squire had furnished it. He was there himself, asleep by the fire. Seeing that he really was asleep, and took no manner of notice, she was emboldened to look round the room. From looking about the room to stepping inside out of the rain was but a natural sequence of events. But it was not in the natural order of things that while her eyes watched the face of the sleeper, her right hand, while the accomplice left held up the apron, should steal forth and convey the loaf beneath that feminine robe proper for concealment. When she was gone, Alan's breakfast-table was as bare as Dame Hubbard's cupboard.

The morning advanced. All the men had long since gone off to their work; but now the women, whose household duties were by this time pretty well accomplished for the day, came out and began to gossip at the doors. And then the rumour ran from house to house that the Squire was in his cottage, that the cottage door was open, and the Squire was sound asleep inside, for all the world to see.

When Alan awoke, which was about half-past eight, he sat up in his chair and rubbed his eyes. Before him, gathered together at the open door of his cottage were the whole feminine population, with all the children who could not yet walk. There was the ancient gammer, her face seamed and lined, and her shoulders bent. There was the strong and sturdy housewife, mother of many, one of whom she was brandishing. There was the newly married wife, fresh from the wash-tub, the suds yet lying on her red arms. There was, the maiden of blushing sixteen, carrying her infant brother. All were there; all were staring with open mouths and eyes, whispering, tittering, and waiting.

When he sat up they started back; when he opened his eyes they fled multivious; so that all he got was a mere sense, or dim half-photograph, of the scene, which might even have been a dream. But he heard the rustle of flying skirts and the skurry of retreating feet, and he divined what had happened.

But they ought not to have taken away his loaf, and his pork, and his sugar. That was carrying curiosity beyond its legitimate limits. And the fire was out, and the water had boiled away, and there was a great hole burnt in the bottom of the kettle. He looked round him in dismay. Up to the present he had succeeded in nothing but in making himself ridiculous.

Why is it, he asked, that a man will cheerfully bear insult, contempt, and misrepresentation, and yet fall into unphilosophic rages when he incurs ridicule? It was a question to which no answer came.

Meantime, what was he to do?

It was nine o'clock. He was hungry. He would consider this a day lost, and he would go over to Dalmeny Hall, and ask for breakfast.

CHAPTER X.

"Methinks it were a happy life,
To be no better than a homely swain."

"Well, sir," Bailiff Bostock said, "if you really do mean it, and will take and work with the men—— Do you mean it—just as you say, and no favour?"

"I mean just what I say. I shall begin to-morrow, and am here now to learn my duties for the day."

Alan was determined there should be no more loss of a day.

"You can't follow the plough, that wants practice; and you can't manage the engine, that wants training."

The bailiff rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"There's a stack of hay we're going to cut into to-morrow; but I can't send you up the ladder, atop o' that great stack. Sure as twopence you'd fall down and break something. Can you drive, Squire?"

"Of course, I can."

"Then I'll tell you what you shall do. It is a dirty job, too——"

"Never mind how rough it is."

"I think you will be able to manage it, for the first job, better than anything else. You come here to-morrow morning, at six sharp, and I'll find you a day's work, never fear."

With this assurance, Alan was fain to be content. He then proceeded, being thoroughly ashamed of the morning's fiasco, to guard against a repetition of it. With this view, he hired a boy to call him at five sharp, got a ventilator for his bedroom, an alarum clock, which he set for five o'clock. He next purchased a new kettle, and provided such materials for breakfast as he could eat, deferring the cold pork until such time as he should become hardened to the bread of affliction.

It was five o'clock in the afternoon when these arrangements were finally completed. He remembered that he had dinner to get, bought a beefsteak and potatoes, and proceeded, with such slender art as was at his command, to grill the former and boil the latter. The potatoes came out hard, but he had eaten horse-beefsteak in America.

Dinner over he sat down, and spent the evening in calculating how best he could live on eighteen shillings a week, with a little extra at harvest-time—say a guinea, all told. Rent, half-a-crown; clothes and boots, five pounds a year at least—say two shillings a week. Remained, sixteen shillings and sixpence for everything. Fuel, candles, soap, odds and ends, would carry away half-a-crown of this. Fourteen shillings left for food and savings; for Alan was resolute on showing the rustics how to save. Say eighteenpence a day for food.

Food. What is food? Half-a-crown goes at the club for luncheon alone with great ease. He would want, he thought, a pound of meat, half a dozen potatoes, and a loaf of bread every day. There is eighteenpence gone at once. Tea, coffee, sugar, milk, butter, cheese, small groceries: all this had to come out of the odd sixpence. And how much would be left for saving? Every penny would have to be looked at, every teaspoonful of tea hesitated over. And then the washing. The male mind does not at first understand the meaning of this item. Now it occurred to him that unless, in the dead of night, and with barred doors, he did his own washing, this charge would be the last straw to break the camel's back. And yet, with the washing before their eyes, the labourers found money to spend at the Spotted Lion. It must come out of his meat. Overcome with the prospect, Alan folded up his paper and went to bed.

In the morning he had a beautiful dream. He was walking hand in hand with Miranda in a flowery meadow, in whose hedges highly-cultured peasants had planted geraniums, standard and monthly roses, rhododendrons, hydrangeas, dahlias, and the stately hollyhocks, which raised their heads and blossomed among the hawthorn, honeysuckle, and straggling blackberry. Beneath them, on the banks, flowered mignonette, verbena, heliotrope, and all sorts of sweet flowers, growing apparently wild. The grass amid which they walked was luxuriant and long, and bright with buttercups and cowslips. Round them, as they walked hand in hand under a sunny sky, sat, walked, or played the villagers, engaged in various occupations, all of which demanded the Higher Culture. For one, clad in a smock-frock, scrupulously clean, was reading Mr. Pater's "Studies of the Renaissance;" another, similarly attired, was studying Darwin's "Descent of Man;" another, an older man, was sitting, brow bent, and pencil in hand, with which he made marginalia over Mill's "Political Economy;" a fourth was composing music; a fifth was collecting specimens in the hedges for a *hortus siccus*. Of the girls, three were standing together in the attitude of the Graces, only daintily attired, singing part songs, with clasped hands; some were making embroidery for their Sunday frocks, and one was reading Ruskin's "Fors Clavigera" aloud for the benefit of those who embroidered. Of the younger men, one in a corner by himself was declaiming, Shakespeare in hand; another was airily reading that sweet, and simple, and musical poem called "Sordello," singing from its rippling measures as he brushed away the dew across the upland lawn; another was correcting the proofs of a Note on the village archæology, which traced the connection of the parish pump with the Roman occupation—these proofs were destined for the *Academy;* another was catching swiftly and deftly with brush and paper the ever-changing effects of cloud and sunshine on the river; the blacksmith was writing a *villanelle;* and the schoolmaster was guessing a double acrostic. The elder ladies, assisted by the oldest inhabitant of the village, Methusalem Parr, were engaged in committing to paper the folk-lore of the district, with a view of sending it to the editor of *Melusine.* Among the *märchen* thus set down for the first time was a nursery story of a Pig, a Porcupine, and a Piper, which afterwards became famous, and was traced to the very foot of the Himalayas, where the inhabitants believed that it descended from Heaven. Just as Alan, in explaining to Miranda the honour and glory which this relic of old-world story would confer upon the village of Weyland, his dream grew a little troubled. The young men and the maidens got confused before his eyes; the meadow grew cloudy; the villagers all seemed to start asunder in terror; books, pens, pencils, all were thrown aside, and they fled multivious with oaths and shrieks, which were not loud and coarse, but low and cultured. Then the meadow changed itself into a small whitewashed room, there was no Miranda at all, and he was lying in his cottage bedroom alone.

"Ting-a-ring-ting!"—was ever alarum more wildly irritating? He sprang from his bed and hurled a boot which silenced that alarum for ever.

Bang, bang, bang! "Five o'clock, master." That was the boy calling him. He composed his shattered nerves as well as he could, and proceeded to dress. It was with a mixture of foolish shame and pride that he put on his corduroys, button-up waistcoat, and clean white smock; these assumed, he descended the stairs, lit the fire, made his tea, managed to get through a little bread and butter—five o'clock is really too early for breakfast—tied his red handkerchief round his neck, put on his soft felt hat, and sallied forth a new Don Quixote. He naturally felt uncomfortable in his new garb: that was to be expected. And as he walked rapidly down the village street, along which the labourers were slouching slowly to their work, it was not pleasant to hear the rustics, whose sense of humour is naturally strongest when the point of the epigram refers to their own familiar pursuits, explode as he passed, and choke respectfully.

In the farmyard, besides the usual belongings, was a cart and horse ready for use, led by a boy. Bailiff Bostock, his own horse ready saddled, was waiting impatiently for Alan.

"Now, Squire," he said, pointing to such a heap as might have come from the Augean stables, "you see that pile o' muck.

It's got to be carted to the fields and spread out in little piles, same as you've often seen when you go out shooting."

"I understand," said Alan, his heart warming with the prospect of real work; "it's got to be pitchforked into the cart, driven to the field, and pitchforked back again. Isn't it boys' work, Bailiff?"

The Bailiff grinned.

"Ask me that in half an hour," he said, and, jumping into his saddle, rode off on the business of the day.

Alan rolled up the sleeves of his smock, and took up the pitchfork. The boy went behind the cart to grin. The smock-frock was white, and the job was so very, very likely to destroy that whiteness that the boy needs must go behind the cart to laugh. Had he not been afraid of the Squire he would have told him that he should begin by taking off the smock and the smart waistcoat under it.

Then the job began. To handle a pitchfork, like other responsible work, requires practice. The crafty pitchforker grasps his instrument at some point experimentally ascertained to be that of least weight and greatest leverage. Had Alan been a Cambridge instead of an Oxford man, he would have known something of such points. But he was ignorant of mechanics, and had to find out for himself.

Half a dozen times that boy, who should have been on the shafts, assisting at the reception of the stuff, came from behind the shafts, each time to go back again and laugh as noiselessly as he could. Alan heard him, though he condoned the offence, considering the novelty of the thing.

The first time that boy looked round the cart the Squire was beginning to puff and pant; the second time he looked, the Squire had pulled off his hat, and his face was shining as the face of one in a Turkish bath; the third time he had thrown aside his red neckerchief and the perspiration was streaming from his brows. But still the Squire worked on. Never before had that boy seen a cart filled more swiftly.

"Now, boy," he said good-humouredly, "when you have done laughing you may tell me where we have to take this load."

The boy essayed to speak, but choked. The situation was altogether too funny. He could only point.

Alan drove the cart down one lane and up another without any disaster, the boy following behind him, still grinning as noiselessly as he knew. Then they came to their field, and the boy pointed to the spot where they had to begin. "This will be easy work," said Alan, mounting the cart.

The task, indeed, was simple. Only to pitch out the manure in small heaps standing in the cart.

The boy went to the horse's head.

After the first heap was out—rather dexterously, Alan thought—the boy made a remarkable utterance:

"O—osier!"

Instantly the cart went on, and Alan, losing his balance, was prostrated into the cart itself, where he lay supine, his legs kicking up. At this sight the boy broke down altogether and laughed, roaring, and bellowing, and weeping with laughter so that the welkin rang.

Alan got up rather ruefully. To be sure, it was absurd to quarrel with the boy for laughing. And yet the condition of that smock-frock from shoulder to hem! Could the washing be included in the fourteen shillings? He pitchforked the second pile out of the cart.

"O—osier!" cried the boy, and the cart went on.

This time Alan fell on his hands and face. The front of the smock was now like the back, and the boy, who had a fine sense of humour, sat down on the ground for unreserved enjoyment of his laugh.

"Why the devil," cried the Squire, "can't you tell me when you are going on?"

"I did," said the boy; "I said 'O—osier.'"

Alan was silent, and resumed his work with greater care to preserve his balance at the word "O—sier."

Just then the Bailiff rode into the field.

"Well, Squire," he said, "boys' work—eh?"

"Not quite."

"Had a fall in the muck? Better have taken off your frock and your waistcoat, too. Live and learn, sir. Don't you be too wasteful o' the muck. That stuff's precious. My missus, she says, if the Squire 'll drop in when he's ready for a bite, she'll be honoured."

"Thank you, Bailiff. I am going to live as the men live."

"What ha' you got for your dinner, boy?"

"Bread and cheese."

"What has your daddy got?"

"Bread and cheese."

"You see, Squire, bread and cheese won't do for the likes of you. However, you have your own way. Have you got your dinner in your pocket, sir?"

"Why—no."

"Now, sir, *do* you think we can afford the time for the labourer to go all the way home and back again for dinner?"

That argument was irresistible, and Alan went to the Bailiff's house, where he was relieved of the unlucky smock.

Mrs. Bostock gave him some boiled pork and greens, with a glass of beer. That was at twelve o'clock: never had he been so hungry.

After dinner, he fed the pigs. Then he was set weeding, which the Bailiff thought a light and pleasant occupation for an October afternoon.

"I can hardly sit up," he wrote to Miranda that evening, "but I must tell you that I have done my first day's work. At present I have had no opportunity of conversing with the men, but that will come in due course, no doubt. My only companion to-day has been a boy who laughed the whole time. Good-night, Miranda."

CHAPTER XI.

"The mansion's self was vast and venerable:
 With more of the monastic than has been
Preserved elsewhere: the cloisters still were stable,
 The cells, too, and refectory, I ween."

It is not to be understood that Alan was entirely satisfied with a lonely evening in a two-roomed cottage, or that he ceased altogether his visits at Dalmeny Hall. Occasionally, to be sure, but this was only at the beginning of his career as a peasant, he varied the monotony of the evening by inviting a brother farm-labourer to take supper with him. On these occasions the repast was of a substantial kind, accompanied by coffee, and followed by pipes. But it brought little joy, much less than might have been expected. The beefsteak was eaten with hunger, but in manifest dis-ease; there was no camaraderie as between fellow-workers in the same noble cause; the coffee was accepted as a poor substitute for the beer of the Spotted Lion, and conversation flagged. Perhaps, Alan thought, there was some defect in his own mind which checked the sympathy necessary to bring out the full flavour of rustic society, and to enter into its inner soul. Else why should the talk be a series of questions on his part, and of answers on the other, like the Church Catechism? And why should his friend, departing at the earliest hour possible, manifest in his artless features a lively joy that he was now free to seek the shades of the Spotted Lion, and pour forth to friendly ears the complaint of a swain who found a supper too dearly bought at the cost of a night with the Squire.

Once, and only once, Alan ventured within the walls of the tavern. It was in the evening. A full parliament was assembled in the tap-room. Every man had his pipe: every man his mug of beer: the windows were close shut: the fire was burning brightly: the petroleum lamp was turned or full: and what with the beer, the tobacco, the smell of clothes drying slowly in the warm room—for outside it was raining—and the petroleum, the stench was like a London fog, inasmuch as it could be seen, felt, and handled almost, as well as tasted.

When Alan appeared at the door, clad like themselves in corduroys, with red handkerchief round his neck, he observed that the same expression gathered slowly, like a cloud rolling up from the west, upon every face. It was not a pleasant expression. There was astonishment in it: there was also disgust: and there was an attempt to force the perfunctory grin of welcome. For every man felt as if he was a schoolboy, and as if Alan was the master. What right, that expression said as plainly as looks can speak, what right had the Squire prying there? As if it was not aggravation enough to have him always about.

Alan read the expression correctly. But he sat down and endeavoured to say pleasant things. The things were not received as pleasant things at all, but of quite the opposite kind. And, as no one would talk while he was there, he came away disheartened. It was not by the tap-room that he should get at the real heart of England's peasantry.

As, therefore, the men cared nothing for his society, would rather not have it, and were *génês* with it, as most of us should be had we to spend an evening alone with a duke, and all of us had we to converse with an archangel, Alan fell back upon his own resources, and when he was not devising new things for the improvement of the people, or when he was not too tired physically for further exertion, he began again those visits at Dalmeny Hall which were almost a necessity of his daily life. That he prefered the garb of an English gentleman to that of an English labourer goes without saying: and also that it was a relief beyond the power of words to escape from the narrow limits of his cottage, and find himself in Miranda's room, in the sunshine of her presence, away from the sordid and mean conditions with which he had surrounded himself.

At first, all their talk was of the great experiment and its chances of success, which were as yet uncertain. But when Miranda had other guests, and her own share of talk with Alan was small, he found himself taking interest, as of old, in mundane affairs of a general nature. It was hard to say whether he returned to his cottage with renewed vigour or with disgust. Certainly it looked meaner and more sordid every day: certain the details of his work appeared more disagreeable: but, on the other hand, he had the sympathy of Miranda, and after each talk with her, the approval of his soul was more largely bestowed upon the Work of his life as he called it (with a capital W), because she, too, thought it great, and worthy, and commendable.

And on Sundays he spent the whole livelong day with Miranda, grudging the lapse of every hour.

In the afternoons, when the morning church, necessary for example's sake to every leader of bucolics, was finished, they would talk. There were the gardens of Dalmeny Hall set about with lawns and flower-beds and shady walks; there were the splendid elms and rolling turf of Weyland Park: there the banks of the silver Wey winding round meadows, lawns, and among great trees: or there was the great Hall of Weyland Court itself, or there was its library. Alan was a great talker to Miranda alone. To her he talked like Coleridge, in a full, rich torrent, though perhaps he was not so unintelligible. To the rest of the world he was a man of reserve, respected because he had the courage of his opinions, and a great cause of small talk by reason of his crotchets, hobbies, and flights. A man with the mysterious power which belongs to one who can hold his tongue. Great in the might of silence.

It was out of these talks that was evolved the Abbey of Thelema.

It began one afternoon in January, when for once the north wind slept, and a warm west wind, which did not carry rain with it, brought comfort to the buds which made all the underwood purple, and were already whispering to each other that the spring was coming. As they walked along the river-bank, Weyland Court rose at their right, on a low hill, in lawns sloping away on every side. They stood and looked at it.

"It is a beautiful place, Alan," said Miranda for the thousandth time. "What a pity that you cannot live in it still, and carry out your plans in your own place."

"Not yet, Miranda," he replied; "not yet for years; not till a new generation has grown up who can run alone in the path of culture."

"What can you do with it?" she asked. "It would be a shame to let it."

"I will never let it."

"And it seems a shame that no one lives in it."

The house was in red brick, and stood round a quadrangle open to the south, like one or two courts of the red brick colleges of Cambridge, say the second court of St. John's, or the ivy court of Jesus, or the single court, only that is faced with stone, of pretty Clare. It had a splendid great hall, which we have already seen; it had a chapel, a library, a long drawing-room, running over the whole ground-floor of one side: it had a garden within the quadrangle: its walls were covered with all kinds of creepers: it had a stately gateway of that ornamented ironwork in which the genius of English art seems most to have concentrated itself. On the west and south lay the great gardens: on the north the view stretched across the park over hundreds of acres of splendid land which, I suppose, ought to be turned into fields arable, but which was rich with wood and coppice and elastic turf. On the east side was planted a thick grove of pines to keep off the English mistral.

The place was erected for a convent, but never fulfilled the purpose of the founder, because after his death—he had been a stupendous sinner, and thought to patch matters up by founding a nunnery—came the dissolution of all the religious orders, and the generous monarch who sent all monks and nuns out into the world, bestowed Weyland Priory, which became Weyland Court, upon the first Dunlop who had ever received the royal favour.

Then Miranda had an idea.

"Alan," she said, "we have talked about all kinds of fraternities, societies, and communities, except one."

"What is that, Miranda?"

"A society where ladies and gentlemen can live together without any aims, either religious, political, or social."

"Is not that the ideal of modern society?"

"But an ideal never reached, Alan. Suppose we formed such a society and placed it at Weyland Court."

"The Galois and the Galoises were such a society," he replied, laughing. "They lived according to their own lights, which I suppose they thought advanced. But I fear we cannot imitate them. Then there was the Abbey of Thelema, which seems to meet your case."

"What was the Abbey of Thelema?"

"When we get home, I will read you all about it."

"Then let us go home at once, and you shall read it to us."

They went home. Desdemona was staying with Miranda, her mother being more than usually ill. Alan went to the library, found the first volume of Urquhart's Rabelais, and read about the story of the celebrated Abbey, which, as everybody knows, breaks off short at the very beginning, and tells an expectant world nothing more than how the Abbey was started.

"It is the way with all good things," sighed Miranda. "What I always want is to go beyond the story; I want to find out how they got on with their Abbey. Did the Brothers and Sisters fall in love with each other? Did they go on living together without quarrels and little jealousies?"

"My dear," said Desdemona the wise, "when the curtain drops, the lovers part, the weeping father dries his eyes, and we all go home to humdrum supper and bed. That is all to be got out of going beyond the story. Believe in the happy moment. The rest is below consideration."

"Ah!" Miranda replied. "But if it were only possible to have such an Abbey."

"Why not?" asked Alan.

"To collect together a band of men and women who would simply lead the pleasantest life attainable, and never forget that they are gentlemen and gentlewomen."

"Why not?" repeated Alan.

"My dear Alan," said Desdemona, "the fact of your extraordinary freedom from young men's follies, though you are yourself a mere boy, makes me hopeful that you mean something."

"I mean," said Alan, "that if you and Miranda could get up such an Abbey, there is Weyland Court for you. First, because it will please Miranda; and secondly, because while I am trying my experiment in the village, Miranda may try hers with people of culture and see what will come of it."

"But it will cost unheard-of sums," urged Desdemona.

"Weyland Court can afford a good deal. It is only keeping open house for a time."

"Alan!" Miranda clapped her hands. "If you really mean it—but, of course, you always mean what you say. Quick, Desdemona, dear; let us have pen and paper and begin our new Abbey. Only," she hesitated for a moment, "people would say that it is quite too absurd."

"People say what they please," said Alan. "Wild words wander here and there. They say I am doing an absurd thing in working on my farm. That is gravely absurd. Suppose we do an absurd thing which shall have no gravity about it at all, but only whimsical, and start our Abbey after the rules laid down by Father Rabelais."

"Yes, Alan, let us try it; we have been too grave lately."

"Then, on one condition, Miranda. It is that you become the Lady Abbess, and that Desdemona gives us her help in organising the thing."

"No—no," said Desdemona. "In your own house you must be Abbot, Prior, or whatever you call it."

But Alan was inflexible on this point. He promised to become an active-working Brother, so long as it did not interfere with his work in the village; he would attend regularly, dine sometimes, take a leading part in the ceremonies, but Miranda must be the chief.

So it was settled.

"And for the ceremonies," said Miranda, "Desdemona must direct."

"I will do what I can," said Desdemona. "Of course, you will have mediæval things revived. You ought to have games, riding at the ring, tournaments, mediæval singing and dancing, and mediæval dresses. All the Brothers and Sisters will be rich, I suppose."

"All but Tom Caledon," said Miranda; "and if we have Tom Caledon, we must have Nelly, and she is not rich at all. But that does not matter."

"Not at all," said Alan.

"Ah! you two," murmured Desdemona. "What a thing for two young people, not one, which always happens, and which is the reason why this world is so lopsided—what a thing, I say, that you can do what you like without thinking of money! If I could only persuade you to run a theatre on high principles, which would not pay."

"The Abbey first, dear Desdemona," said Miranda. "And when that is done with, if ever it is, we will have our theatre, and you shall be the manager."

But Desdemona shook her head.

"Women ought not to be managers," she said. "They make bad administrators. There is only one man fit to be the dictator of a theatre. And that is—but I will tell you when we start the new house."

Then they all three went over to Weyland Court and examined its capabilities.

"What do you think?" asked Alan.

"The hall," said Desdemona, "will, of course, be the refectory, and the ball-room as well. Think of dining habitually in so splendid a hall. The lovely drawing-room, which is like that of Guy's Cliff, only longer and more beautiful, will do for our ordinary evenings; I see several rooms which will do for breakfast and morning rooms. There are stables ready for fifty horses: the kitchen is fit for a City company——"

"And rooms," Miranda interrupted, "for as many Brothers and Sisters as we can take in. Shall we have twenty-four, Desdemona? That seems a good round number to begin with."

But Desdemona thought twenty would be better, and they resolved on twenty.

"Every Brother and Sister to have two rooms," the girl went on, warming to her work, "and one room for his or her servant. That makes sixty rooms; and there are plenty to spare for guests, without counting the three haunted chambers."

"Oh!" said Alan, "you will have guests?"

"Of course," Desdemona answered. "What is the good of showing the world how to live if nobody comes to see you? You might just as well act to an empty house."

"And who will you invite to join?" Alan asked.

Miranda threw herself into a chair, and took paper and pen.

"You, Alan, for one. What name will you take? But we will find you one. And you, Desdemona dear, under that name and no other. And I Miranda, because I shall not change my name. That makes three out of the twenty. Then we must ask Adela Fairfax, if only for her beautiful playing. And Edith Cambridge, because she is so beautiful and so clever. And perhaps Major Vanbrugh will join us. And then there is Tom Caledon. Oh! what an Abbey we shall have!"

So the Abbey was started. And to the County it seemed a more desirable piece of madness than the farm. And nothing gave the world so much satisfaction as the name conferred upon Alan Dunlop. For, as Lucy Corrington told Lord Alwyne, as the Brethren never knew what he would do next, they called him Brother Hamlet.

"But what, in the name of goodness," asked Sister Desdemona, "are we to do with the Chapel?"

CHAPTER XII.

"We may outrun
By violent swiftness that which we do run at,
And lose by overrunning."

Meantime, the days crept slowly on with Alan. To rise at dawn, or before it; to go forth after a hasty breakfast prepared by his own hands, to receive his orders from the Bailiff; to get through the day's work as well as he could, feeling all the time that he was the least efficient labourer of the whole twelve hands, or even, counting the boys, of the whole twenty-four, employed upon the farm, a useful but humiliating lesson for the young Oxford man who had been trained in the belief that whatever a gentleman put his hand to, he would immediately do better than anybody else; to wear those confounded corduroys, turned up at the ankles; to meet his friends in such a disguise that they seldom recognised him; to pass a cavalcade of ladies riding along the road, and to pull his cart—as a carter Alan was perhaps as good as any other man on the estate—out of their way into the ditch; to work on in a field, conscious that a dozen people were leaning over the gate, come forth on purpose to see the Squire attired as a labouring man, carrying out the teaching of the "Fors Clavigera;" to acquire an enormous appetite at the ungodly hour of eleven, and appease it, sitting in a hedge, with great bunches of cold bacon and bread—actually, cold bacon and bread—and other homely cates; to plod home at night to his dismal damp cottage, there to light a fire, and brew a solitary tea for himself; and after tea to fight against the physical fatigue, which seemed to numb all his faculties at once;—this was the life which Alan for the most part led. As regards his work, he found that he made but an indifferent labourer; that his companions, who undoubtedly excelled him in practical bucolic art, scoffed at him almost before his face, and that, so far from becoming the friend and confidant of the men, he day by day seemed to be drifting farther from them. It was from no pride or exclusiveness on his part. He fed the pigs, drove the cows, groomed the horses, carted the manure, hedged and ditched, learned to manage the steam plough, taught himself the great Art and Mystery of Thatching, learned a little rough carpentering, tried to shoe a horse, but got kicked, and grubbed up the weeds as patiently as any old man in the village.

"The busy hours," he said to Miranda, "are doubled by the solitude. The men, among themselves, talk and make merry after their fashion. What they talk about, or what their jokes between themselves are, Heaven only knows. When I come among them they are suddenly silent. Even the boys are afraid of me."

"You will understand them," said Miranda, after a time.

He shook his head.

"I begin to despair. And in the evening when I should be useful and ready to devise new schemes for their benefit, the weariness is so great, that I sit down in my chair, and half the week, fall fast asleep."

"And can you live on your wages, Alan?"

Here, I regret to say, he positively blushed, because here, he felt, was the great breakdown of his plan.

"No, Miranda, with all my economy, I spend exactly double what I earn. I cannot understand it. I began with drinking nothing but water and coffee. Yet one gets so confoundedly hungry. How *do* they manage it?"

Not only did he begin with coffee and water, but he began by knocking off tobacco. He would no longer smoke.

"And yet," he said to Miranda, "it made no difference to the people whether I smoked or whether I did not. They don't seem to care what I do. As for beer, they drink as much as they can get; and as for tobacco, they smoke as much as they can."

"Although," said Desdemona, "you have sacrificed your interest in Havanna, they retain theirs in Virginia. Why not?"

"So I have taken to tobacco again, and I confess I like it."

"And the total abstinence plan—how does that work?" asked Desdemona.

"I have had to give it up. What is the use of letting the people know that you have given up wine when they cleave to their beer?"

"Exactly," said Desdemona, who could never be taught to sympathise with the grand experiment. "You gave up your allegiance to the grape of Bordeaux, and you fancied they would give up theirs to the barley of the Spotted Lion. Poor enthusiast!"

"Well, I have taken to my claret again, now. And, of course, it is absurd to pretend any longer to live within my wages."

"You have been brought up," said Desdemona the sceptic, "to live as all English gentlemen do; that is, well. You tried suddenly, and without preparation, to live as no English gentlemen do; that is, in a minimum. What could you expect but a breakdown?"

"Yes," he said sadly. "It is a breakdown, so far."

"As your daily diet is different from theirs," the woman of experience went on, "so are your thoughts different from their thoughts. Your brain is quickened by education, by generous diet, by freedom from care; theirs are dulled by no education, by low living, and by constant money anxieties. You have travelled and read; they know nothing but what they see. My poor Alan, what sort of minds do you propose to understand with all this trouble?"

"There is a sense in all men," said Alan, which lies dormant in some, but must be a lingering spark that wants the breath of sympathy to kindle it into flame. It is the spur of all noble actions. I want to light that flame in all their hearts."

"In your rank," said the actress, "they call it ambition, and it is laudable; in theirs, it is discontent, and it is a crime. Would you fly straight in the face of your Church Catechism?"

As the days went on, the physical weariness grew less, Alan became stronger; the pains went out of his legs and arms; he could stoop over a field and go weeding for hours without suffering; he acquired, as we have said, an enormous appetite, and, probably because he lived better than the rest of the men, he found himself after a time able to sit up in the evening, work, write, and devise things for the good of the village.

First, he began to look into the doings of the Parliament, which had now held a weekly Saturday evening sitting for some six weeks. He discovered, on inquiry, that his orders about providing a good supper, with abundance of beer, had been literally and liberally carried out, but that, as no minutes of proceedings were kept, it was impossible for him to discover what, if anything, had been discoursed. What really happened, as he soon found out, was, that the men, after eating the supper and drinking the beer, adjourned without any further debate to the Spotted Lion.

This discovery struck Alan with consternation. He took blame to himself for the carelessness with which he had left the Parliament to its own duties. He ought, he remembered, to have attended at every meeting, to have presided, suggested topics of discussion, and led. But he had always been so tired. One thing, however, was clear. It was not enough to point the way. The rustics required a leader. That he ought to have known all along.

Accordingly on the next Saturday evening, the members of the House of Commons received an intimation by means of a flyleaf, that supper would no longer be provided, as it appeared to be a hindrance to deliberation.

"You may," Alan wrote, "when you divide your profits from the farm, vote whatever proportion you please to be spent in a weekly supper. Indeed, some such sort of common festal meal, to which the women and children could be admitted, seems most desirable and helpful. But I cannot longer encourage a feast which I designed as a preliminary to serious talk, and which seems to have been converted into a drinking-bout."

"What does the Squire mean by this here, William?" asked the oldest inhabitant.

But William could not explain this unexpected move. It was beyond him. A weekly supper which had lasted for six weeks seemed destined to last for ever. When the men recovered sufficiently to discuss the matter, it was considered as an act of meanness beyond any precedent.

On the following Saturday, Alan came to the Parliament, bringing with him a bundle of papers for discussion. At the hour of assembling there was no one there at all. Presently the cobbler of the village dropped in casually. After him, pretending not to be his friend, came in a stranger, who practised the art of cobbling in the cathedral town of Athelston, near Weyland. And then the schoolmaster looked in. The cobbler of Athelston, after a decent pause, rose energetically, and asked Alan if this was a place for freedom of speech.

"Certainly, my friend," said the young reformer. "We are met together to discuss all points."

"Then," quoth the cobbler, "I am prepared to prove that there is no God."

Alan assured him that political and social problems, not theological, were the object of the Village Parliament. But he would not be convinced, and after a few withering sarcasms directed against autocrats, aristocrats, and priests, he retired, followed by his friend, the village cobbler who secretly nourished similar persuasions. There is something in the smell of leather which is fatal to religion.

There was then only the schoolmaster left. He was a moody discontented man, who chafed at being under the rule of the vicar, and longed for the superior freedom of a school board. Being by right of his profession a superior person, he cherished the companion vices of contempt and envy. These naturally go with superiority ; and he came to the Parliament like some of those who go to church, namely, with the intention of scoffing. His intention was gratified, because, as no one came at all, he had the satisfaction of going home and scoffing in his lodgings at the Squire. Alas ! a secret scoff within four walls brings no real satisfaction with it. You *must* have two to bring out the full flavour of a scoff. Fancy Mephistopheles enjoying a solitary sneer ! That is one reason why hermits are such exceedingly jolly dogs, ever ready for mirth, and credulous to a fault.

"It is no use," said Alan to the schoolmaster, "not the slightest use bringing forward a measure for discussion when there is no one present but you and me. Let us adjourn the house."

As they passed the Spotted Lion together they heard the voices of the rustics in high debate. The tap-room was their true House of Parliament.

There was once a good and faithful missionary who, after weeks of unrewarded labour, succeeded one evening in persuading three native boys to mount with him into an upper chamber, there to make inquiry. He naturally began with fervent prayer, and being carried away by fervour, continued this exercise aloud, with eyes closed, for the space of forty-five minutes or thereabouts. On opening his eyes, this poor labourer found that the three inquirers had stealthily crept away during his uplifting, and were gone.

Alan felt as sad as my friend the missionary. People who will not be led, and to whom it is useless to point the way, must be gently pushed or shoved in the right direction—a truth which Baxter perceived many years ago, and which is illustrated by a well-known tract. Therefore, as self-reform was not to be hoped for, he began to reform the village for them.

First he opened a shop in the village on the most enlightened co-operative principle. It was that by which the purchasers divide the profits in proportion to their purchases. Alan first proposed to the village shopkeeper that she should exchange her shop for the post of manager under the new system. But she was a person of defective imagination, and could not be persuaded to see the advantages of the offer. Alan then issued a tract in which he explained exactly and clearly the method to be followed. Every purchase, with the name of the purchaser, was to be entered in a book, and at the close of the year, when the books were made up, the profits were to be divided equitably according to the amount of the purchases. The shop was to be a sort of universal provider. Alan entrusted the management to a young man who promised to give it his undivided care for fifteen shillings a week, rent, fire, and candles. The young man was not pleasant to look upon, but he was highly recommended by his uncle, who had a grocery establishment in Athelston. He was a Particular Baptist by conviction, and ready to preach if invited. He was only eighteen, and had sandy hair, which, of course, was not his fault.

"We must succeed, Miranda," cried Alan, in a sort of rapture, standing in the newly-opened shop. "We sell everything at ten per cent. over cost price. We sell everything of the best, there will be no adulteration, of course; we give no credit, and consequently have no bad debts. And in our tract we appeal to almost the lowest of all human motives—the desire for gain. It is a system which only has to be stated and understood in order to be adopted at once. Not only will our customers see that they get their tea and other things cheaper, but better, and in the long-run that they share in the advantages of honest trade. Good tea,"—here he clasped the canister to his heart,—"good sugar, good rice, good cheese, good flannel—everything good. Why, the village-shop will regenerate the village. And Miranda, the first step is taken when I have made them discontented with their present condition."

Alan laid in for himself as much tea and groceries as would suffice for ten cottages. Then, in his ardour, he ordered his housekeeper at the Court to use the village-shop; persuaded Miranda to drive into the village and order quantities of things which she did not want, all of which were paid for on the spot, and got the Vicarage people to patronise it, so that the shop began with a fair stroke of business. One thing only went to mar the general cheerfulness: none of the villagers went into the shop at all, unless when Alan invited them, and, after explaining at length the principles of co-operation, bought articles of domestic consumption for them, and paid for them on the spot. Then they went away, bearing their pounds of tea, and came no more. The reason was, not only the habit of going day after day in the same way, in the fetters of use and wont, but also a more important reason, that they all had "ticks" at the old village-shop which they could not pay off. Alan's only plan would have been to have shut up the ancient establishment, pay all the debts of the village and start fair. Even then, there would be some of the more dashing spirits who would spend their wages at the Lion, and ask for credit on the very next Saturday.

There was a third hindrance to the success of the shop: one which was as yet unsuspected by its promoters. It was, that the manager, the sandy-haired young man of the name of Hutchings, was contracting the habit of sitting secretly and by night over the ledgers, not with the lawful desire of estimating profit and loss, but with the reprehensible design of cooking the accounts. As nobody interfered with him, and he gave no receipts, this was not difficult; and as immunity encourages the sinner, he soon prepared two ledgers, in one of which he entered faithfully before the eyes of the purchaser any item, and in the other he divided the purchases by half, or even left them out altogether; and he put the money into his pocket, and went off to the city of Athelston every Saturday evening.

"I hope, George," said his uncle, meeting him, "I do hope that you have had a warning, and are now going straight."

"Ah! yah! there you go," replied his nephew, "always throwing a thing into a poor fellow's face. Why don't you go off and tell the Connection? Why don't you take and write to Squire Dunlop? Ah! why don't you?"

"If you'd been my son," said the man of virtue, "I'd have behaved to you as a parent should—cut your liver out first, and turned you out of the house next."

Which shows what a useful thing is a testimonial, and how, like charity, it may be made to cover a multitude of sins.

Exhilarated by the dream of his shop, Alan prepared the way, by another tract, for his next great move; this was nothing less than a direct blow at the Licensed Victuallers' interests.

"I propose to establish," he said, in the introductory tract which he sent about the village—these were now so numerous that they ceased to interest the village mind at all, any more than the Sunday sermon—"I propose to establish a bar at which only plain and unadulterated beer, sent to the house by the best brewers, shall be sold, with the addition of a very small percentage for management and carriage. The price shall be exactly that which can repay the producer. It will, therefore, cost about half of what you now pay, and will, of course, be infinitely better in quality. Three-fourths of the crime of this country is due, not only to excessive drinking, but to the drinking of bad liquor; and the same proportion of disease is due to the same shameful cause. My shop will be called the 'Good Liquor Bar.' The beer will be drunk on the spot, or carried away to be consumed among your own families, or while you are following your favourite studies. It will be paid for when ordered. The bar will be under the same roof as the shop."

Mr. Hutchings, fortunately, had a young friend in Athelston who, although a sincere Christian and a fellow-member of the Connection, was experienced in the liquor traffic. By his recommendation the young friend was appointed on probation. He was not nice to look at, any more than his companion. but good looks go for nothing. The two young men lived together, and when the shop and bar were shut, it was pretty to see them innocently making up their double ledgers. On Saturday evenings they put money in their pockets and went off to Athelston together.

"You see, Miranda," Alan explained, when he was offering her a glass of pure beer in the Good Liquor Bar itself, "you see that if we offer them a room with table and chairs, we only perpetuate the waste of time which goes on at the public-house over the way. As they will not do without beer altogether, which we could wish, perhaps they will learn to use the bar as a house of call, not as a village club. We must wait, however, I suppose, until we have got our reading-room before we shall succeed in getting them to spend the evenings rationally. Already, I think, there are symptoms of a revival; do you not, Miranda? I saw one of them reading my last tract this morning."

"It is the young man they call Will—i—am," said Miranda; "I saw him too. It was he who ordered in the cask of beer at the first Parliament. No doubt he is thinking how to get some advantage to himself out of the new bar."

"William has not, to be sure, enlarged views," said Alan. "In the lower levels the instinct of self-preservation assumes offensively prominent forms."

"You are looking fagged, Alan," she said in her kindly sympathetic way; "are you taxing your strength too much?"

"We had some heavy work this morning. Nothing more. I am a little disheartened sometimes, that is all. Any little thing like the sight of our friend with the tract gives me a little encouragement. And then one gets despondent again."

Already he was beginning to feel that culture was not to be suddenly and swiftly made admirable in the eyes of Old England's peasantry.

The Work was, however, as yet far from complete. Alan's designs embraced a great deal more than a Co-operative Shop and a Good Liquor Bar. His next step was to build a Bath House with a Public Laundry attached. There were hot and cold baths, a swimming-bath for men and another for women. This was an expensive business, and one which he never expected to pay the preliminary outlay. But it was part of his scheme, and in a really eloquent tract he explained that those who regard bathing as a luxury for the rich, forget that it is one of the accompaniments of godly living. The institution was to be on the same co-operative principles as the shop and the bar, the profits being divided among the bathers and the washerwomen. He began by setting an example of an early morning tub to the whole parish. No one followed him. He might as well, indeed, have invited the villagers to sit up to the neck in a clear fire for half an hour as ask them to take a cold bath. Bathing, however, he recognised to be a thing which requires gradual training.

"The history of bathing," he said to Miranda, "is a curious chapter in that of civilisation. I do not think either Lecky or Buckle has treated it. Once, indeed, Dr. Playfair made the egregious blunder of stating in the House that for a thousand years nobody ever washed himself. Nothing could be more untrue; what really happened was that the public bath of the whole Roman people became a private luxury reserved for the rich among the Westerns. In England and France the nobles never ceased to enjoy the luxury of a bath, and there are plenty of evidences to show that the poor took it when they could get it. But in England the custom fell out, and it is true that for something like a thousand years poor people have ceased to wash themselves. Heaven only knows what ideas may not come in with the return to personal cleanliness."

When the Bath-rooms were completed, or even before, he began to convert what had been a Dissenting Chapel into a Free Library and Reading Room. This did not cost much. He fitted bookshelves round the walls, filled them with a selection of a couple of thousand volumes, which he partly chose from the Weyland Court Library, and partly bought from catalogues, put in a few chairs and a couple of tables, laid out pens and paper, gave orders for certain papers and magazines, and installed a Librarian.

The Librarian was a pale-faced pupil-teacher, a girl whose delicate constitution would have broken down under the pressure of rough school-work, and to whom the post of custodian of the Library and Reading Room, at a salary of sixty pounds a year, was a little heaven. She was the first convert whom Alan Dunlop made in the village. Like another Cadijah, she was an enthusiast. Mr. Dunlop was her prophet: she read all his tracts and kept supplies of them for her friends; she absorbed all his theories, and wanted to carry them right through to their logical conclusion; she preached his doctrines in season and out of season. To her Mr. Dunlop was the greatest thinker, the noblest of men, the wisest of mankind. Needless to add that a tract appeared as soon as the Library and Reading Room opened, pointing out the advantages to be derived from serious study, and the enormous superiority of the Reading Room as a place of comfort over the Spotted Lion.

"And now," said Miranda, when she came with Desdemona to admire the Library, "now, Alan, that you have done everything that you can for the villagers, I suppose you will give up living among them and come back again to your own place?"

"Everything, Miranda? I have as yet done next to nothing: if I were to withdraw myself, the whole fabric which I have begun to build up with so much care would at once fall to pieces. Besides, I have only just begun, and there is nothing really completed at all."

"Well, Alan, go on; I can sympathise with you, if I can do nothing else," said Miranda gently.

They were in the Library, which had been open a week. It was in the evening, a fine evening in early January, when the frost was out on the flooded meadows. No one was in the Library but themselves, Desdemona, and the young Librarian, who was gazing with large rapt eyes at her prophet.

"Go on, Alan. There are only Prudence Driver and ourselves to hear you. Prudence will not gossip in the village. Tell us what you think of doing next."

"I have not decided quite on the next step. There are so many things to do. Among other plans, I am going to organise for the next winter—not for this—a series of weekly lectures on such scientific subjects as can be made popular. Astronomy, for instance, practical chemistry, and so on—things that can be made interesting by means of oxy-hydrogen slides, diagrams, and experiments. Some of the lectures I shall give myself. Some I shall have to pay for."

"These will not come out of the profits of the farm, I suppose?" said Desdemona, who really was a Didymus for want of faith.

"No, it would not be fair; the lectures will be for the whole village, and will be my own gift to them. Of course they will be free. If only I could get the men out of that wretched habit of abstracting their thoughts the moment one begins to talk. Then I shall have a night-school; a shed where we can drill the younger men and boys——"

"And, oh! something for girls, Mr. Dunlop," pleaded the young Librarian. "Everything is done for the boys, and the girls are left to grow up as useless and as frivolous as—as—as their sisters."

"You shall take the girls under your charge, Prudence," said Alan kindly, "and I will do for them whatever you think best. Consider the thing carefully, and propose something for the girls."

"Next," he went on, "I mean to have a Picture and Art Gallery."

"A picture gallery? For rustics, Alan?" Miranda was amazed, and even Prudence, prepared for any length, gasped. Desdemona sat down and fanned herself, though it was a cold night.

"A Picture and Art Gallery," he repeated. "Why should Art belong only to wealthy people? Are we not to suppose a love of beautiful things—a feeling for form and colour—to exist in the minds of our poor? Tell me, Prudence, child, what you think?"

She shook her head.

"My father is one of them," she said, "and my brothers and sisters. I think there is no such love of Art as the books tell us of among them."

She had the Library all to herself, and browsed in it at her will, so that she could speak of books with authority.

"It is only latent," said Alan. "The contemplation of beautiful things will awaken the dormant sense. My pictures will be only copies, Miranda, and my collection of other things will be a loan collection, for which I shall put all my friends under contribution. Prudence is going to be the first Curator of the Gallery."

The girl's eyes sparkled. This was too much happiness.

"And then, Miranda," Alan went on. "I am going to have festivals and dances for the people. They are stupid because they get no amusements; they have no amusements because those who have taken charge of them, the clergy, have fostered an idiotic notion that amusements such as people like—those which stir the pulses and light up the eyes and fill the brain with excitement—are wicked. It is wicked, the people have been taught, to dance. It is wicked to dress up and act; it is wicked to go to theatres, though, to be sure, our poor folk have got small chances of seeing a play. Now I am going to start in my village a monthly ball for Saturday night, at which the dances will be the same as you have at your own balls—the young people will soon learn them, I believe; I am going to build a small theatre and run a country company for a month in the year, without thinking whether it will pay; I am going to encourage them to try acting for themselves as an amusement; I shall train a band of village musicians, and establish a madrigal club; I shall hold festivals, to which the people can invite their friends from other villages, and which shall be directed by themselves as soon as they have learned the art of self-government; and I am going to organise expeditions to distant places to London, for instance, in order to teach the people how wide the world is, and how men and women live in different fashion."

"That sounds very beautiful, Alan," said Miranda, "if it is feasible. But do you think it is?"

"I hope so—I think so. At least we can try it."

"And how long will your experiment take?"

"All my life, Miranda," he answered, meeting her look, which had an expression almost of pleading, with an inspired gaze of enthusiasm.

She left him and drove home, sorrowful. All his life! To live all the years of his life in that little cottage; to work every day at rough and thankless farm-work; to toil every evening for the slow and sluggish folk. Surely even the "Fors Clavigera" did not exhort to such self-sacrifice.

Always, every Sunday, as the weeks went on, Miranda thought Alan more melancholy over his experiment. And there was always the same burden of lament.

"I cannot enter into their minds, Miranda."

No talk of giving up the work; no leaving the plough and turning back; only confession of failure or of weakness.

"If I could only understand their minds!"

The autumn deepened into winter; winter passed away, and spring; and summer found Alan Dunlop still plodding among the furrows all the day, and working for the rustics all the evening. But he grew worn and downcast, finding no fruit of all his toil.

CHAPTER XIII.

"But none were *gênés*: the great hour of union
  Was rung by dinner's knell: till then all were
Masters of their own time—or in communion
  Or solitary as they chose to bear
The hours."

A MONASTERY which has no fixed rules may yet have certain practices. Among these was one that no Brother or Sister should be called in the morning, unless by special arrangement. The father of this custom was a philosophical Brother who held that the time to go to bed is when you can no longer keep your eyes open, and the time to get up when hunger compels you. Naturally, this Brother was always last at breakfast.

It is not easy, with every desire for innovation, to improve very much on the national custom of breakfast. Some took a cup of coffee at eight, and breakfasted at eleven in French fashion. One or two, including Desdemona, breakfasted in their own rooms. No one, said Desdemona, ought to be expected to be in good spirits, to say clever things, or to be amusing in the morning. She added that her experience of life taught her that good temper is not a thing so abundant as to be lavishly squandered over foolish extravagances early in the day, but to be carefully guarded and even hoarded for the evening, when it is wanted to crown and complete the day. For this reason she kept her own room. For the rest, separate tea and coffee sets were provided for every one, and they came down at any time, between eight and one or two, which seemed good.

On the morning after her reception, Nelly appeared at half-past eleven, a little ashamed of herself for lateness. Tom was in the breakfast-room, waiting for her. Miranda had long since gone to Dalmeny Hall. There was a melodious tinkling of music in the corridor as she passed the Sisters' rooms. There was a rehearsal of a new two-act piece going on in the theatre; and there was all the bustle and sound of a big house in full swing for the rest of the day. Only her fellow-novice, Brother Peregrine, was still at breakfast. Nelly took a chair beside him, and Tom began to run about getting her things.

"Sister Rosalind is not fatigued, I hope?" asked Brother Peregrine, with more anxiety than Tom thought altogether called for.

"Thank you; not at all," replied the girl, attacking breakfast with the vigour of twenty; "I never am tired after a ball. What makes me tired is sitting at home with mamma."

"Still, that must be delightful for her," said Mr. Exton.

"Not delightful at all, I assure you. We only quarrel. Don't we, Tom, especially when there is some one to quarrel about?"

Tom laughed, and declined to compromise himself by any statements on Mrs. Despard's domestic manners and customs. Mr. Exton began to draw conclusions.

"I am very late, Tom," she went on. "Give me some tea, please. We might have had a ride before breakfast. Why did you not send somebody up to call me?"

"We will ride after breakfast instead."

"And now, tell me, what do we do all day in the Abbey? And how do you amuse the Sisters?"

"We all do exactly what we please," said Tom—"the Sisters paint, play music, practise theatricals, consult about dress, ride, walk,—and, in fact, they are perfectly free to act as they think best."

"Of course," said Nelly, "else I should not have come here. That was the reward you held out if I would come. There are no duties, I suppose: no chapel six times a day, for instance."

"Absolutely none. There are not even calls to be made. The Sisters have decided that they are not bound to return visits while in the Abbey."

"Now, that is really delightful. All my life long I have been yearning to escape from the round of duties. They were bad enough at school, and most intolerably stupid, but sometimes now I think they seem even far worse. Have you duty letters to write constantly, Mr. Exton?"

"Pardon me, Sister Rosalind—Brother Peregrine. I have no duty letters, now that I have left India."

"Brother Peregrine, then—do you have to drive round in a one-horse brougham leaving cards? Do you have to remember how long since you have written to people you care nothing about? Those are my duties. And very, very hard work it is. But now that I am here, Tom, I expect to be amused. What will you do for me?"

"I will ride with you, dance with you, act with you, talk to you, walk with you, and fetch and carry for you."

"That is very good, and just what I expected," she replied. "And what will you do for me, Mr. Exton?"

"Pardon me, Sister Rosalind—Brother Peregrine," he corrected again, gravely.

"Brother Peregrine, then—what will your Brothership do?"

"I can do some of the things which Brother Lancelot proposes. Perhaps I can do a few which he has not proposed."

"What are they? I am very easily amused, so long as I am kept in a good temper; am I not, Tom?"

Tom laughed.

"Can you be frivolous?" she asked. "Can you be mischievous? Can you make me laugh? Tom breaks down just at that point. He can't make me laugh. Can you—can you, Brother Peregrine, become, to please me, Peregrine Pickle?"

The face with the myriad crows' feet grew profoundly grave.

"To be frivolous," said its owner, "without being silly has been my aim and constant object in life. I studied the art in the North-western Provinces, where there was nothing to distract one. What shall I do? I can juggle for you. I can tame serpents; I can make apple-trees grow in the ground before your eyes; I can swallow swords; I can make little birds come out of the palm of my hand—"

"You shall have an evening at the theatre," said Tom, "and show off all your conjuring tricks."

"I can sing to you, after a fashion; make songs for you, after a fashion; play the guitar, too, still after my fashion. I could even do acrobatic tricks, and walk on my hands, or stand on my head, if that would please you."

"It would, indeed!" Nelly cried with enthusiasm. "I have never seen a grown man walking on his hands. It would please me very much."

"Well," interposed the young man she called Tom, "you are not going to be entirely dependent on us two for your amusements. Let us look at the day's engagements."

He took a card from a silver stand on the breakfast-table. It was like the *menu* of a big dinner, being printed in gold letters on coloured card with edging and border-work of very dainty illumination.

"This is the list of the day's engagements," Tom went on. "Of course no one is engaged, really, because here we all do what we please. But there seemed no other word that quite met the case. Desdemona draws it up for us every day. Sometimes it remains the same for several days together. Sometimes it varies. I will read it to you while you finish breakfast.

"'THE ABBEY OF THELEMA.

"'*Engagements of Tuesday, July* 9, 1877.

"'11 A.M.—Brother Bayard will deliver a lecture in the hall on the Eastern Question, and the duty of England at the present juncture. Admission by the western door for the Order.'"

"At eleven?" asked Nelly. "But it is half-past now. And besides,"—she pulled a long face—"one hardly went through the trouble of being received and everything in order to have the privilege of hearing lectures. Is it, after all, only like the Crystal Palace? 11—Lecture. 12—the Blue Horse. 1.30—the Band. 2.30—the Burlesque. Tom, I am disappointed. After all, it is useless to expect anything from life but what one has already got."

"When you have quite finished," said Tom gravely, "you will let me remind you that you have not yet mastered the first rudiments of the Order. '*Fay ce que vouldras.*' If you feel any yearning to give a lecture, go and give one; if you want to hear anybody else's lecture, go and attend. I suppose that Brother Bayard has been reading all sorts of pamphlets and papers on the Eastern Question, and has got his head full. It is much better that he should work off the thing in a lecture, than that he should keep simmering over it, writing a book about it, or troubling the peace of the Abbey with it."

"Then we need not go to the lecture?"

"Certainly not. If you like we will look in presently and see how large an audience he has got together. And if you really take an interest in the subject, you will very likely find it published next Saturday in the *Abbey Gazette.*"

"Have you a newspaper here, then?"

"There are three. The *Gazette* is the official organ, which generally comes out, unless the editor forgets, on Saturday morning. In the *Gazette* everything is published which the members like to send—verses, love stories, articles, anything."

"How delightful! May I send something?" Visions of glory floated for a moment before Nelly's eyes. Yes, she, too, would be a poet, and write verses for the *Thelema Gazette*.

"I ought to mention one drawback," Tom went on; "I believe nobody ever reads the *Gazette*. But, if you send anything and tell me of it, I'll make a point of reading it."

"Thank you," said Nelly. "An audience of one doesn't seem much, does it? I think it must be hardly worth while writing verses for one person."

Brother Peregrine here remarked that in his opinion that was the chief charm of verse-writing.

"Then there are two other papers," Tom continued, "edited and written by two members of the Order, known to ourselves as Brother Benedick and Sister Audrey. They run their novels through the papers, I believe, and Rondelet, whom we call Parolles, because he is all words, contributes leading articles to inculcate the doctrines of the Higher Culture. Nobody reads either of these papers. I forgot to say that you will find their editors in private life most delightful people. In public they squabble."

"Who is Mr. Rondelet?"

"He is a Fellow of Lothian, Oxford." Tom looked as if he did not care to communicate any more about Rondelet. "Let us go on with our engagements for the day."

"'At 12.30—Organ Recital, by Sister Cecilia.'"

"It is exactly like the Crystal Palace," cried Nelly.

"Only without the people. Fancy having the Palace all to yourself and your own friends; fancy acting, singing, dancing, just as you liked, without the mob."

"If I acted," said Nelly, only half convinced, "I should like somebody to be looking at me."

Tom did not contest the point, but went on:

"'At 2.30 P.M.—Polo in the Park, if the Brothers like to play.'"

"I shall go, for one," said Tom, with brightened eyes.

"So shall I," said the Brother they called Peregrine.

"We will play on opposite sides," said Tom, jealous already of the newly-elected Brother.

Mr. Roger Exton nodded, and went on with the cold beef.

"'At 5 P.M.—The Abbess will receive in the Garden.'"

"I forgot to tell you, Nell, that the Sisters have their own afternoons. There is no necessity to hamper ourselves with the divisions of the week, and as there are now ten of you, we shall have to give you the tenth day. The days are announced in the morning list of engagements. Of course nobody is obliged to go. Mostly we go into the garden at five when it is fine, and find some one there with a table and a teapot."

"When I have my afternoon, Tom, will you be sure to come?"

"Of course I will." Then their eyes met and dropped with a light smile, as if they had memories common to both, and perhaps pleasant.

"May I come, too, Sister Rosalind?" asked the man of a thousand crows' feet, noticing the look and smile while he drank his tea.

"Certainly, Mr. Exton."

"Brother Peregrine—I beg pardon, Sister Rosalind," he corrected gravely for the third time.

"'At 6 P.M.—Carriages will be ready for those who want to drive. Brothers who want a dog-cart must give early notice at the stables.'"

"Carriages?" Nelly asked with a laugh. "Have you any number of carriages?"

"I think there are a good many. Alan has half a dozen of various kinds that belong to the place, Miranda has sent over hers, and a good many of the Fraternity have sent down horses and traps of all sorts. So that we can turn out very respectably."

"I think, Tom," said Nelly, "that if you would go to the stables and say that you want a dog-cart for six o'clock, you might drive me about and show me the country."

"May I sit behind?" asked the crow-footed one gently and humbly.

Tom scowled on him.

"Certainly you may," said Nelly, "if you like sitting behind."

"I do like sitting behind—sometimes," he replied.

Then Tom went on with the list.

"'At 7.30 P.M.—Dinner. Choral night.' That means," he explained, "that the band will play and the boys will sing. Do you like hearing music and singing during dinner?"

"I never tried it," the girl replied. "If it was not noisy music I might like it. One ought to think of one's neighbours at dinner; that is the most important rule."

Mr. Exton said that self-preservation was the first law of life, and that he always thought of eating as the first characteristic of dinner.

"'At 9.30—Performance of an entirely new and original comedietta in two acts in the Theatre of the Abbey. Stage manager, Sister Desdemona.'"

"Ah!" sighed Nelly; "that all seems very delightful. And what do we do after dinner, Tom?"

"Isn't that enough, child? After that we shall probably meet in the drawing-room. This is like all other drawing-rooms. Somebody sings; somebody plays; if a waltz is played, perhaps two or three couples may go round the room as if they were waltzing. I can go no farther, Nelly; your imagination must supply the rest."

"And do you always live like this?" She heaved a deep sigh of content. "Always?"

"Yes, while we are in the Abbey."

"And is no one ever cross?"

"Never, unless in their own rooms."

"Does nobody's mamma ever come down and order some unfortunate Sister back again to home and duty?"

"No; that has never happened yet."

"Do you have guests?"

"Yes; but they are not allowed to get cross either. Everybody in this Abbey is always in the best possible of tempers. It is impossible to be anything but pleasant in this fortress of happiness."

"Did you—ever—ask—mamma, for instance,"—Nelly put this question slowly, as if it was a poser,—"to join the Abbey for a few days?"

"I do not think we have," replied Tom, with a light in his eyes; "I cannot ask her for my own part, you know."

"Well, Tom, until you have asked her, I decline to believe that your Château Gaillard is impregnable. However, if your tempers are always perfect, your days are surely sometimes a little dull. Now, without falling into temper, which is, after all, an ill-bred thing to do, it is quite possible for young persons of my sex to get together and say unkind things about each other. Do the Sisters—oh, Tom, tell me this—do they never show a little—just a little—envy, and hatred, and uncharitableness about some one's dress—or—perhaps certain attentions paid to some one?"

"I really think, never."

"Then," said Nelly, rising from the table and putting her little foot down firmly, "this is a heaven beyond which I never care to go."

"In the North-west Provinces——" began Brother Peregrine.

"Does that anecdote," interrupted Nelly, "bear upon the Abbey, or upon juggling, or upon walking on your hands?"

"On the last," he replied, with a certain sadness.

"Then it will wait, I think. Come, Tom, it is getting late. Let us go and see the lecturer."

"I forgot to say," said Tom, as they walked along the corridor which led to the hall, "that some of the Sisters have mornings. Would you like to receive in the morning?"

"It sounds pleasant. What do you do at a morning reception?"

"Nothing. You receive. Any one may call on you in your own cell. They call them cells, but really all are beautiful boudoirs; and some, Desdemona's for instance, are large rooms."

"But perhaps only one would call."

"Well, Nelly?"

"But, then, it would give rise, perhaps, to wicked tongues."

"There are no wicked tongues in this place. We all live as we like; we never think evil, or speak evil, of each other. 'A perfect trust,' Miranda says, 'is the true groundwork for the highest possible form of society.' Give up your worldly ideas and be a true Sister of the Order, and, like your namesake in 'As You Like It,' 'forget the condition of your estate, and devise sports.' Let us be happy together while we can, Nelly."

"Yes, Tom," she replied prettily and humbly, while his hand sought hers for a moment.

"What morning will you have?" Tom asked. "Let me see—Sunday——"

"Oh! Tom, you heathen—church on Sunday."

"Monday—Tuesday—Wednesday; I think no one has a Wednesday, and you can receive between twelve and two."

"Yes, I see; all comers. Perhaps only one comer; what an opening! And just suppose, Tom, only suppose for a moment that you were that one comer, and that all of a sudden mamma were to arrive, and catch me receiving you all by myself. Oh——h!"

"I don't know, I really do not know, what she could say worse than what she said at Ryde. However, here is the hall-door. Hush! we must not disturb the lecturer."

There were no signs of a crowded audience, quite the contrary; everything was still and deserted, but they heard the voice of the orator within. Tom pulled a curtain aside, and they looked in. The hall was quite empty. Nobody was there at all, except the lecturer. He was provided with a platform, on which were the usual table, *carafe* of water, and glass, with a desk for his manuscript. In front of the platform rows of empty seats. The lecturer, who was just finishing, and had indeed arrived at his peroration, was leaning forward over the table on the points of his fingers, while in earnest tones, which echoed and rang along the old hall, he spoke.

"Yes, my friends," he was saying, "all these things point in one direction, and only one. This I have indicated. Standing, as I do, before an audience of thoughtful men and women, deeply penetrated as I am with the responsibility of words uttered in this place, I cannot but reiterate, in the strongest terms, the convictions I have already stated. Shall then, I ask, shall England tamely submit——"

Tom dropped the curtain.

"Come," he whispered, "we have heard enough. Let us go back. That is the way we inflict our opinions on each other. I lectured the other day myself."

"Did you, Tom? What on?"

"On the Inconveniences of a Small Income. Nobody came, indeed I did not expect anybody, and I spoke out like Cicero."

"Indeed," said Nelly; "I have always thought, when men will talk politics at dinner, how very pleasant it would be for each man to have said all he had to say by himself for a quarter of an hour before dinner. Then we might have rational conversation."

"*Your* rational conversation, Nell. I like it, though. The prettiest prattle in the world to me."

She looked in his face and laughed.

"Let me go and put on my habit. That sort of speech is dangerous, Tom."

When she returned, she found the horses waiting, and Brother Peregrine mounted too, ready to go with them.

"I found your horses walking about," he said. "May I join your ride?"

Of course he might, Nelly said. Tom thought it the most confounded impertinence, and rode off in stately sulkiness.

"Now," he said to himself, "she is going to flirt with the fellow, because he has got ten thousand a year. She's the most heartless, cold-blooded——"

And after the little ride he had pictured to himself, *solus cum solâ*, along the leafy lanes, listening to her pretty talk, so frank, and sometimes so cynical. You can't thoroughly enjoy the talk of a lovely damsel when it is shared by another fellow, and he a possible rival. As the old ballad says, in verse which means well, but is rugged:

"Along the way they twain did play,
The Friar and the Nun:
Ever let twain alone remain
For companie: three is none."

But the day was bright and the sun warm, and Nelly gave him a good share of talk, so that Tom recovered his temper and came home in that good humour which befits a Brother of Thelema.

There was no polo after luncheon, because nobody except Tom appeared anxious to play, not even the new Brother, whom Tom found, with a pang of jealousy, surrounded by the Sisters, doing Indian tricks, to their unbounded delight. He made them find rings in their pocket-handkerchiefs, watches in their gloves, and bracelets in their sleeves. Then he called his Indian servant, who brought a bag of little clay balls and sat down before him playing a tum-tum, a necessary part, the conjurer explained, of his incantations. He took the little balls in his hand one after the other, and they changed into singing-birds and snakes, which worked round his wrist and made as if they would bite. Then he planted one in a flower-pot and covered it with a basket. When he took the basket off for the first time there was a tender little plant; when he took it off the second time there was a little tree in blossom; and when he took it off for the third time there was a little tree in full fruit. All this was very delightful, and more delightful still when he took a sword, and vehemently smote, stabbed, and hacked his servant, who had done nothing, and therefore took no hurt. And, lastly, he covered the servant over with a big basket, and when he took that off, behold! he was gone.

After the Indian tricks some of them went into the gardens. There was at Weyland Court a garden which had been constructed somewhere about the thirteenth century, and remained ever since untouched. It had an immensely high and thick hedge along the north and east sides. It was oblong in shape, and surrounded on all sides by two terraces. You passed by stone steps from the higher terrace to the other; on the upper was a sun-dial, round whose face was carved a Latin inscription in old-fashioned characters; in the middle of the garden was a fountain. It was planted with roses and with the flowers dear to our grandmothers; wall-flowers, double stocks, sweet-williams, candytuft, and so forth. All sweet-smelling flowers, but no gaudy beds patterned in uniformity of red and blue and yellow. There were no walks, but grass grew everywhere between the beds, turf green and well kept, on which on warm mornings one might lie and bask. Low seats were here too, on which were spread cushions and soft things of rich colours, which contrasted against the soft green of the turf, and the splendour of the flowers. Here Miranda held to-day her five o'clock tea, and while some played lawn tennis and others practised archery, she received those who came to talk lazily, lying on the grass or sitting beneath the shade, while Cecilia sang old French songs to the accompaniment of a zither; and Nelly's merry laugh, like the ripple of a shallow brook over the pebbles, was music sweeter to one ear at least than all the harmonies that can be produced from zither or from lute.

The monastic names were a *gêne* to some; to others the names fitted naturally. Tom Caledon, for instance, who was Brother Lancelot on days of ceremony, was more easily addressed as Tom. But Desdemona, Cecilia, and one or two others wore their name always. Nelly, to those who had not known her before, was the prettiest and most natural Rosalind in the world. There was something outlandish in Mr. Roger Exton's good-humour, quiet persistency, and cleverness which made the whole Brotherhood address him habitually as Peregrine. On the other hand, Rondelet, Alan Dunlop, and one or two others had monastic names which in a way were deceptive, so that these were seldom used. You cannot be always calling a man Hamlet, because you do not know what he will do next; nor Parolles, not because he is a braggart, but because he is all words and talks about everything.

When the shadows of the July day began to lengthen they gradually left the garden, and went, some driving, some walking. Tom did not take out the dog-cart that day, but strolled with Nelly in the park and through the glorious woods.

"If mamma knew that you were here, Tom," she whispered, "I should be ordered home at once. What am I to say when I write? I *must* tell who is here."

"Shall I go, Nell?"

She shook her head.

"That would spoil all. I will mention your name in the middle of all the others, instead of first, and write it quite small, and drop a blot upon it. Then, perhaps, she will not notice."

Poor Tom! Then he really was first in her mind.

"And if she says anything, why then, I will tell her you have promised to abstain from foolishness."

"Foolishness!" echoed Tom, with a sigh. "But we are to have plenty of walks and talks together."

CHAPTER XIV.

"With evening came the banquet and the wine;
The conversazione; the duet,
Attuned by voices more or less divine."

THE dinner-hour was half-past seven, a time fixed by Desdemona, as *Arbiter Epularum*. She said she did not want to turn night into day, and liked to have an evening. Dinner was served in the great hall, which made a noble refectory. Not only Desdemona, but one or two of the Brothers exercised steady surveillance over the *menu*, of which the great feature was that it presented every day a dinner which was not only excellent, but also composed of few courses.

"There are," said Desdemona, "only two or three countries which have any distinctive dinners. But by judicious selection of *plats* we may dine after the fashion of any country we please."

So that sometimes they dined *à la Française*, and sometimes *à l'Espagnole*, when they had Olla Podrida; or *à l'Arabe*, when there was always a pillau; or *à l'Inde* when there were half-a-dozen different kinds of curry, from prawn curry, which is the king, prince, and even the emperor of all curries, down to curried vegetables; or *à l'Allemande*, when they had things of veal with prunes; or *à l'Anglaise*, when, in addition to other good things, there was always a sirloin of beef; or *à l'Russe*, or *à l'Italienne*. As there is no cookery in America, it was impossible, save by the aid of canvas-backs, to dine *à l'Américaine*. A servant stood behind every other guest, and instead of the wine being brought round, every man named what he would take. The table was lit by wax candles only, which shed their soft light upon the flowers and silver. And all round the table stretched the great hall itself, the setting sun still lighting up the glories of the windows, and wrapping in a new splendour the painted glass, the black beams of the roof, and the silken banners of the fraternity. When the sun was set and the day ended, the hall was very dark and black save for the table itself, the lights upon the sideboards, and, on choral nights, the lights for the musicians and the choir.

Nelly sat between Tom and Brother Peregrine, who occupied his place by right of his age in the Order, which was that of the youngest. She thought she had never before assisted at a banquet so delightful and so splendid. Opposite to her was Miranda, at whose right was Alan Dunlop, fresh from the fields, looking grave and even melancholy. Next to him, Desdemona, clad in a robe of heavy satin, looking animated and happy. There was music too, to make the feast more luxurious. The boys who sang the hymn at the Reception were there, in a sort of stage costume, and the band which played at yesterday's ball, which was, indeed, a company brought down from London expressly for the Abbey. They played soft music, old-fashioned minuets and gavottes, music selected by Cecilia, which was not intended to fire the blood, nor lead the thoughts into melancholy channels, nor constrain the talkers to give their undivided attention to it; music of a certain gravity, as becomes dinner music, which should inspire thought, recall memories, but not be sad. And from time to time the boys threw up their fresh young voices into the air in some tuneful old part-song, which fell upon the ears of the guests, bringing a sense of coolness as from the spray of a fountain on a summer noon. Dining was no longer the satisfaction of an appetite; it became the practice of one of the fine arts. And the claret was of the softest, the hock of the most seductive, the champagne of the brightest.

For dress, the men wore a black velvet costume, designed by Desdemona herself, though I think Mr. Planché would have recognised it. The sombre black was relieved by the collar of the Order, and the crimson rope which girded every waist. It was a dress which sat well upon men who were young and tall. The Brothers were all young and mostly tall. As for the Sisters, they wore what they pleased, and they naturally chose to wear what suited them best. But all had the collar, the hood, and girdle of the Order. Sister Desdemona surrounded her portly person with a magnificent robe of satin, in which she might have played a stage queen. Miranda had some gauzy and beautiful dress of soft grey, and Nelly wore white.

"It is like a dream, Tom," said the latter. "It is so splendid as to seem almost wicked. Do you think it is really a dream? Shall I wake up and find myself in Chester Square again, with mamma exhorting on the sinfulness of dancing three times with a detrimental?"

"Especially if his name is Tom Caledon," said that Brother.

They gave one toast every evening, which Alan, or Brother Hamlet as the Public Orator, gave without speech or ceremony.

"The Master."

Then all rose, and murmured as they drank—

"Fay ce que vouldras."

The theatre had been built in the last century by a former Dunlop, owner of Weyland Court, after his own designs. The stage was small, but large enough for all ordinary purposes, and especially adapted for drawing-room comedy. The auditorium was semicircular, the seats being arranged so that every row was a foot-and-a-half above the one below it, like a Roman theatre. It is an admirable method for sight and hearing, but has the disadvantage of narrowing the number of the audience. The lower seats consisted of easy-chairs, in crimson velvet; the upper ones, which were given to the servants, who could bring as many of their own friends as they pleased, were padded benches, with arms and back. The house held about a hundred and eighty or two hundred, and on evenings of performance was generally quite full. It was lit by oil lamps and wax candles only, so that the pieces were necessarily of the simpler kind, and no effects of light could ever be attempted.

Desdemona, by right of her previous profession, was naturally the stage manager. It was she who conducted the rehearsals, drilled the actors separately and together, suggested the by-play, and sometimes, if a part suited her, went on the stage herself.

The piece played to-night was a little drawing-room comedy, taken, of course, from the French: time, and therefore dress, the last century; dialogues sparkling with cleverness, and that kind of epigram which only the French dramatists seem able to produce; which has a point, but yet does not stab; which disarms an enemy, but does not fell him to the ground; which turns the laugh against him, but does not insult him—in fact, dialogues of the days when men respected each other on account of the appeal to duels.

It was a very little after-dinner piece and took less than an hour in all, so that one rose from the amusements refreshed and not fatigued, as one generally is by a long evening at the theatre.

Then they all went back to the drawing-room. It was an old-fashioned room, very long, narrow, and low, running along a whole side of the quadrangular court; its windows opened out upon lawns; it was dimly lighted by only a few lamps and candles, and these were shaded so that the rooms would have been almost dark save for the brightly-lit conservatory at one end.

The evening was all too short. One or two of the Sisters sang and played; there was talking and, so far as Nelly's practised eye could discern, there was more than one flirtation—at least there were the usual symptoms.

Peregrine sat by her and began to talk, but his idle words jarred on the girl's ears, and seemed out of tune with the beauty of the day and the place. She escaped, and took refuge in the conservatory, where Tom Caledon was sitting with Miranda, Desdemona, and Alan Dunlop. She noticed then how heavy and careworn the young Squire, who was also a farm labourer, was looking.

"You like the Abbey, Nell dear?" asked Miranda.

Nelly sank upon a cushion at the feet of the Abbess, and took her hand.

"It is too wonderful and delicious," she said; "I feel as if I were in a dream. Miranda, if mamma knew the glorious time I am having here, and—and"—here she glanced at Tom—"and everything, I should be recalled, like an ambassador."

"It is a great relief to me," said Alan, "coming over here after a rough day and finding myself among you all. My house was never put to so good a purpose before."

"How does your public kitchen get on, Alan?" asked Miranda.

"Nothing gets on well," he replied gloomily. "We started very well. We had five and forty women cooking their dinners, at the same time. We gave them the materials for the first day, you know—chops and steaks. Next day, when nomaterials were given, nobody came; and nobody has been since except my own woman."

Miranda sighed.

"Why do you persist in going into the troublesome village, Alan?" Desdemona murmured from her chair, which was close to some heavily-scented flower, the property of which was to soothe the soul with a sense of luxury and content, and to make it irritable at the thought of struggle, discomfort, or unrest. Else Desdemona was generally the most compassionate and sympathetic of creatures. To be sure, she never could quite sympathise with Alan's schemes, and she lost her patience when she drove out and, as sometimes happened, met him in a smock-frock driving a cart in the lanes. "Why do you go into the troublesome village at all, Alan?" she asked in such a voice as they acquire who linger too long in lands where it is always afternoon. "Come up and stay for ever here with us, in the Abbey of Thelema. Here you shall be wrapped in silk, and lulled to sleep by soft music: or you shall take your part, acting in the delightful comedies we are always devising. We will make much of you, Alan."

But he shook his head.

Then that elderly lady, intoxicated with the perfume, went on murmuring softly:

"I take my part in the play and make my points, and it is so like the stage that I look round for applause. Children, I will not be called Desdemona any more. I am in a glorified Bohemia—not the place where poets starve and artists borrow half-crowns, and both make love to milliners—but in Shakespeare's Bohemia, where Miranda is Queen, and I am one of the Ladies-in-Waiting, and this is a Palace in the City of Prague."

CHAPTER XV.

"It was a lover and a lass,
With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino."

"I THOUGHT, Tom, we were to be Lancelot and Rosalind in the Abbey?" said Nelly.

They were in the park, sitting under the shade of a mighty chestnut. Outside, the stillness of a hot summer noon. For once, Tom had the girl all to himself, without the lean and crows'-footed young Nabob, who persistently intruded himself upon his proposed duets with her. Quite alone, she was very pretty that morning, he thought; prettier, even, than on the evening when, with bright eyes and flushed cheeks, she danced the minuet with him in the robes of a Sister.

Perhaps a corresponding vein of thought was running through her mind, too. Girls do not, I believe, fall in love with men for their beauty, and certainly no one ever called Tom Caledon an Adonis. Adonis is generally pictured as slender, delicate, effeminate. Tom was broad-shouldered, strong of limb and sturdy. There was nothing effeminate about his short curly hair, his ruddy cheek, his swinging stride. "Tom," Nell might have said to herself, "is the best of all the men I know, and the most considerate for me. He is not so clever as Mr. Rondelet: he isn't so full of projects as Mr. Dunlop: he is not so distinguished as Brother Bayard, V.C.; but he is the best of all the Brothers, and I wish—I wish——"

I do not know what she might have wished, because Tom began answering her question very slowly.

"When we are together, Nell, which is not often, on account of that confounded fellow who haunts you like a shadow, we may forget the monastic names."

"It is not my fault, Tom, that we are not oftener together. I can't *tell* people to go away and leave you and me alone, can I?"

"But you needn't encourage people," he grumbled.

"I had a letter from mamma, yesterday," Nelly went on. "She has heard, she says, that a Mr. Roger Exton, who has made a fortune in Assam, is at Weyland Court—she won't give in to calling it the Abbey—and she hints that, so long as I behave properly to Mr. Exton, she will let me go on staying here."

Tom growled.

"So you see, Tom, if you want to see anything of me, you had better make up your mind to tolerate Mr. Exton."

"Hang Mr. Exton!"

"I am sure I should not care if you did. But don't be cross, Tom. Remember you are in the Abbey of Good Temper. Besides, it is not like what you used to be in the good old days. We will be a good deal together if we can. Perhaps," she sighed, "we shall never get the chance again."

"Do you like it, Nelly," Tom asked, "being—a good deal together, I mean?" His face was not so frank and open as his companion's.

It was a year and a day since he had put a question, similar in import, but perhaps of more special meaning, to the same young lady. It was on Ryde Pier, and in the evening, what time the summer waters of the fair Solent stretched broad and smooth on either hand, and the lights of the ships at Spithead, the yachts in the roadstead, and of Southsea, five miles away, made long lines across this ocean lake; while the summer air was soft and warm; while the lazy water of the flowing tide lapped at the supports of the pier and gurgled among the planks below; while, as they two leaned side by side, looking out beyond the pier, and picturing endless happiness, the steps of those who came and went upon the pier dropped unheeded on their ears, and the music of the band was only the setting of the love-song in their hearts.

A year and a day. Did she, he asked, in faltering tones, did she like him well enough to be always with him? No matter what answer she gave. It was what he hoped, and it filled his heart with joy unspeakable, so that the rest of that evening was spent within the gates of Paradise.

Well, it is a very pleasant place to visit even for a single night, and the memory of it lingers and is a happiness to dwell upon. But, unfortunately, these visits never last long, and in Tom's case he was promptly expelled by a person who, somehow, had the guardianship of his Paradise. The angel with the flaming sword in this instance took the form of the young lady's mamma. She was a person of commanding presence, great power of speech, trained by long battle with her late lamented warrior-spouse to use winged words like sharp arrows, and, being herself poor and of good family, filled with ambitious hopes for her daughter, so lovely and so sweet. Therefore, when Tom confessed that his income was under seven hundred a year, and that he had no prospects to speak of, or prospects of the vaguest and most unreliable character, Mrs. Despard allowed wrath to get the better of politeness, and let Tom have it. He must never, under any circumstances, speak of such a thing again. She was surprised, she was more than surprised, she was deeply hurt, at what she could call nothing but a breach of confidence. She had trusted him with her daughter, feeling sure that she was safe with one who had known her from infancy. With his means, his very humble means, the matter was ridiculous and not to be thought of for a moment. Did he know the expenses of housekeeping? Did he know the cost of bringing up a family? Had he thought that her daughter, her Eleanor, was to become a common household drudge? And, finally, she must wish Mr. Caledon good-morning—for ever. Henceforward they were to meet as strangers.

So Tom found himself outside the door. It was a facer. And there was no help for it. The energetic widow followed up her onslaught by a letter, in which she said that she should feel more at her ease in Ryde if Tom was out of it; and that, if he did not see his way to changing his quarters, she should be obliged to sacrifice the rooms which she had taken for two months at eight guineas a week.

So poor Tom had to go, packed up his portmanteau, and went mooning about by himself on the Continent. He did not enjoy himself much till he came to the Engadine, which was full of Rugby and Marlborough masters, so that the contemplation of their great superiority, and the listening to their artless prattle, soothed his soul and made him think of Mr. Rondelet, the man in whom Alan Dunlop believed.

A year and a day; and here he was again at the Pearly Gates, and no infuriated mamma as yet in sight.

"Do you like it, being a good deal together?" he asked ungrammatically.

"Yes," she replied frankly and without the least hesitation. "Haven't I told you so over and over again? Men will never believe what one says. Does it please you, Tom, to hear me say it again? I do like it, then; I like it very much; I like it too much for my peace of mind, Tom. Will that do?"

"Oh, Nelly!" cried the enraptured lover.

"I like being with you better than with anybody else, man, woman, or child, in the whole world. I am sure it ought to be so. You have known me so long that you are a kind of brother by this time."

"Brother! oh!" Tom groaned.

"Which reminds me"—her manner changed suddenly. While she confessed her "liking" for Tom's society, her face was glowing, and her eyes were soft and tearful. She was very near having a weak moment, only that stupid Tom was afraid, and let the opportunity for a bit of real love-making go by. "Which reminds me," she said, suddenly putting on a careless and even a flippant air, "that there are certain things which cannot be talked about."

"Why not, Nelly?"

"Because they are impossible things; yes, Tom; quite—quite. Isn't there a rule that the Brothers are not to say foolish things to the Sisters?"

"No rule of the kind at all," he said. "In fact I was never in a country-house where so many foolish things are said. To be sure, the place is full of charming girls."

"And of course you find it easy to say foolish things to all of them," she said, with the least little delicate shade of real jealousy.

"Don't, Nelly; you know well enough." Tom was again ungrammatical, but perfectly intelligible.

"This is a world, Tom, as mamma says, in which common sense is wanted. You have only got seven hundred a year. I have got—nothing. Can we—could we—does anybody live on seven hundred a year?"

"I believe Dunlop is living on eighteen shillings a week," Tom replied. "But we could, Nelly. I have calculated it all out on paper, and we really could. And you should have a horse to ride as well."

"And a season in town; and a run down to Brighton; and perhaps six weeks on the Continent; and you to have your club and hunter—oh! and my dress, because mamma has always said that she should not consider it her duty to help me after I was married. Tom, *can* we do all this on seven hundred a year? Ask your heart, as they say on the stage."

Tom was silent for a few moments.

"But we need not want all this, Nell. We could live somehow where things are cheap—beef at twopence, and potatoes free—you know; and we would be"—here he looked queer—"we would be economical, Nell."

She burst out into a merry laugh.

"You are a ridiculous boy, Tom. How *could* we be economical? Isn't the life we lead the only life we can lead with any pleasure? And are you not a most extravagant man? How much do you owe?"

"One can't be very extravagant on seven hundred a year," said Tom, with a sigh. "And to think that you of all girls are ready to throw yourself away for money—oh, Nell!"

"Tom, I've heard that kind of thing said in novels and in plays, over and over again, but you know in real life it is silly. Lord Methusalem marries little artless Lily, and then the satirists talk about it as if it were so awful for Lily. Why, Tom, she isn't artless at all; she likes it. She knows perfectly well what she is doing. Am I artless, do you think?"

"You look artless, Nelly."

"You know very well, then, that my looks are a snare. I never had any secrets from you, Tom, had I? Who knows better than you that I must marry, if I marry at all, a rich man; and the richer the better? I suppose that men are not necessarily brutes and bears because they are rich. Why, there is Alan Dunlop; he is rich, and not a brute; and half-a-dozen of the Brothers; and lots of others that I know. I really do not see why a rich man should not be as pleasant as a poor one, though he never is in the novels. My husband must be rich, and I only hope with all my heart that he will be pleasant."

"But it's such a mercenary—I mean—you know what I mean."

"I know, Tom," said Nell. "If we could do just whatever we liked, there is nothing I should like better than to say 'yes' to you—just as I did on the dear old pier; you know that, Tom, don't you?—and go straight away to church, you and I together. Oh! how happy I should feel while the clergyman tied the knot! And what a rage mamma would be in! But that is all nonsense. We are born in a rank of life, as the Catechism says, and have to be contented therewith. That is, I suppose, we must accept our fate and make the best of it. And my fate is—not Tom Caledon—poor old Tom!—but somebody or other—Lord Methusalem perhaps. And don't think I shall be miserable and die of a broken heart! I shall do nothing of the kind. I shall make a fair bargain. I shall marry a man who will give me a good income, a position, kindness, and—and—perhaps—what *you* make such a fuss about, Tom"—here she turned red and hesitated, picking at a flower—"what they call—Love. And I shall give him all I have got to give—all any woman can give—myself." She stopped for a moment, and seemed as if she were trying to collect her thoughts. "And it will be a bargain all to my advantage."

"What, Nell? A man gets *you*, and you think it is a bargain to your advantage?"

"Ah! Tom, you think that girls are artless, you see. That is the mistake that men make. My dear Tom, we are miracles of common sense and prudence."

Tom pulled the most dismal face in the world.

"Don't, Tom." Nelly laughed and then sighed. "Don't. It's hard enough as it is, not being able to—to have one's own way. You might at least help me."

"I will, Nell. I declare I will. I promise you that I will not ask impossible things—as you call them. But you must give me something for my promise. You must walk with me, dance with me, and ride with me."

"I will do all that," said Nelly. "But, Tom, you must not be angry if I—flirt with anybody I like among the Brothers of the Order."

"I suppose," said Tom ruefully, "that I have no right to say a word, whatever you do. And there are plenty of men here for you to flirt with; and I suppose I shan't have the chance of edging in a word at all."

"Certainly not, if it is a disagreeable word," she said.

Tom got up.

"There *must* be something wrong in the management of the world," he said, "when two people like you and me, who are made for each other, can't be married for the want of a few miserable dollars. Why, Nell, can you conceive of anything jollier than for you and me to be always together, to do what we like, go where we like, and live as we please? Do you think you would get tired of me? To be sure I am not clever."

She shook her head; something like a tear came in her eye, and she did not look up.

"I should never get tired of you, Tom. It is the men who get tired of their wives, not the women of their husbands."

"I wonder, now," said Tom, "whether I couldn't go in for something and make money. There was MacIntyre of ours, I remember. He went into the Advertising Agency business, and told somebody, who told me, that he was making a thousand a year over it. And there was another man who went into wine on Commission. And another who took to writing. And Tom Bellows went into manure."

"And I hope he stuck there," said Nelly. "Oh! Tom, to think that you will ever make anything. You? There's another point of resemblance between us, Tom, that we are both born to spend, not to save. It is a much happier condition of life. And now let us go home for luncheon. Is not that Peregrine coming to meet us?"

"I thought he couldn't let us alone very long," growled Tom.

CHAPTER XVI.

"So many hours must I tend my flock,
So many hours must I take my rest,
So many hours must I contemplate,
So many hours must I sport myself."

AFTER nearly a year of continual effort in the village, it was almost time that some results should be arrived at. And yet the young Reformer's countenance grew darker every day as he looked about for what should have been the fair and smiling harvest of his toil, and found only the same old weeds. Every one of his projected reforms had been by this time fairly commenced. The Parliament—the plan of which he had hoped to widen, so as to make it embrace the broad interests of the whole village instead of the comparatively narrow business of a single farm—was a House of empty benches. On the suppression of the gratuitous supper the rustics ceased to take any further interest in the proceedings. A show of a weekly conference was held, it is true, but it was like the Roman Senate under the Empire, having no power, and being the mere shadow of a name. It consisted, indeed, entirely of a duet between Alan Dunlop, himself, and his bailiff. Perhaps, now and then, the two young men of religious principle who had charge of the Co-operative shop and the Good Liquor Bar, put in a silent appearance. Occasionally, as has already been stated, the meetings were attended by the saturnine schoolmaster. He showed little enthusiasm for a movement which brought no good to himself. The cobbler of anti-religious sympathies abstained after his first visit. If you could not discuss Atheism, what was the good of Parliament? He considered all this talk of farm work sheer waste of time, which might much better be devoted to the destruction of Christianity, monarchy, and the aristocracy—to parcelling out the land and introducing communism. One night the young man they called William came and proposed, with greater liberty of expression than might have been expected of him, a vote for the increase of wages and the decrease of hours, which he supported on the plea that it would afford the labourers time to attend the night-school and the reading-room. But Mr. Bostock made short work of him, so that he came no more. Still the Parliament was kept up, and Prudence Driver entered the minutes regularly, acting as Clerk of the House. Also, Alan always introduced his new ideas first to the House, and then circulated them in the form of tracts.

In the course of the year quite an extensive literature of tracts grew up in the village, all written entirely by the Squire, and most generously given away for the exclusive use of the people. Among them were—

The *Tract on the Co-operation of Employer and Labourer*, with a Tentative Conjecture on the share which the latter ought to have in the Profits. This was the treatise presented to the first sitting of the Parliament, but as it was unfortunately mistaken for paper provided as pipe-lights, it became immediately out of print. I believe a copy is now as rare as an Editio Princeps of *Gargantua.*

The *Tract on Total Abstinence* which followed, produced the results which such tracts always do. The woman got hold of it and quoted figures. Then came domestic disagreements, and the men, to escape nagging, went to the Spotted Lion, where they agreed on the merits of the Tract, and wondered why no one followed the Squire's example. But the weekly chalks did not grow less.

The *Tract on the Good Liquor League* obtained an additional importance from the fact that the landlord of the Spotted Lion thought it was meant as an attack upon himself, particularly when the writer spoke unkindly of treacle, salt, and sugar as additions to beer which ought not to be made. Otherwise this Tract would certainly have fallen flat.

In the same way the *Tract on Co-operation in the Village-shop* met with no readers except the one village shopkeeper. She, like the landlord of the Spotted Lion, resented its appearance as aimed directly at herself and her own interests. But her weekly lists of tick did not diminish.

The *Tract on Cleanliness in the Home* was kindly and even cheerfully received by the men. They snorted, chuckled, and grinned, wondering what the women would say to it. The wives, however, thought the Squire had best keep to subjects more proper to man-folk, and spoke disrespectfully about meddlers, even throwing out hints on the subject of dish-clouts.

The *Tract on Art in Common Life* was, as Alan felt himself, a little above their heads. The beautiful language regarding Common Things, the Blade of Grass, the Tuft of Moss, the common wild flowers, and the singing of the lark in the sky, fell unresponsive on their hearts.

The Tract which recommended daily bathing was received with an apathetic silence, which left no room for doubt as to the opinion of the village.

The Tract about Free Libraries and a Public Reading-room was considered to concern other people. Probably it had been printed and given out at their doors by mistake. The villagers, anxious not to think their Squire a madman, charitably put this down as the postman's error.

The *Tract on Amusements* excited surprise rather than curiosity. They were to dance every week—dancing was an Art strange and forgotten. They were to have a theatre—they had never seen a theatre—and a circus and a band of music, and to go out all together for holidays. Like the boys and girls, which was degrading.

The *Tract on the Model Cottage*, showing how the garden and the pigsty paid the rent and provided the Sunday dinner of beef and cabbage, with the pudding under the gravy, excited aspirations which were as fleeting as vague, and were speedily drowned in beer. It may be confessed that not one single cottage grasped the idea that roast beef and Yorkshire pudding were attainable objects.

The great difficulty was that nobody wanted to read—nobody wanted to change—nobody wanted to improve. The duty of discontent had not been taught these simple rustics. It was sad for Alan to hear in the evening those voices of the real village Parliament raised in clamorous cheerfulness in their taproom which were silent at his own Assemblies ; it was sad to feel that his tracts fell unheeded on dull and contented ears ; it was sad to meet the Vicar and acknowledge that, so far, he had done no better from his cottage than his reverence from his pulpit ; or the Vicar's daughters, who respected him mightily and were unfeignedly sorry to learn how things did not advance a bit, and how, the only purchasers at the Co-operative shop were themselves and Miss Dalmeny. Perhaps the failure of his shop and his bar was the saddest thing about the whole experiment, because in establishing them he had, as he told Miranda, appealed to the very lowest principle, that of self-interest. Could people be so stupid as not to be alive to their own interest ? Both the excellent young Christians who resided together and administered shop and bar, stood, all day long, at the receipt of custom with brightly varnished beer-handles and polished counters, but had no custom. And yet the tea was good and the sugar good ; and the beer was the bright and sparkling fluid from Burton, not the sugary mess of the Spotted Lion.

For this stiffnecked generation took kindly to nothing except what was actually given to them. As long as soap was distributed the mothers came to the Public Laundry. When they had to bring their own soap, they preferred the seclusion of home. The men, for their part, gave a ready patronage to the Bar so long as the tap ran free, which was for the first week. During that blissful period every man was allowed a pint in the evening. By this it was intended to cultivate the village palate into a taste for real beer. The pint despatched, it was mournful to see them slouch across the road and enter their accustomed taproom.

It was almost as painful to visit the Library where Prudence Driver sat every evening alone. Now and then, perhaps, the schoolmaster might look in to borrow a book and exchange gloomy remarks with her. Then he would go out, and the door would bang behind him, and the girl would sit by herself wondering *why* people preferred to be ignorant, and endeavouring to master the principles by which her Prophet was guided. Once the shoemaker, already referred to, came with a list of books beginning with Toland and Volney, and ending with Renan. As none of these works were in the Library. he explained to Prudence that she was an accomplice in the great conspiracy, of which every king, priest, and holder of property was a member, for keeping the people in ignorance. It is impossible, however, to satisfy everybody, and when the Primitive Methodist minister of the circuit visited the Library and found the works of certain modern philosophers upon the shelves, he asked the Librarian whether she realised the possession of a soul, and whether she knew of the punishment allotted to those who wilfully disseminate error. So that it seemed as if nobody was pleased. But the girl had her consolations. Sometimes Mr. Dunlop himself would sit in the reading-room all the evening, and now and then he talked with her over his plans. Sometimes Miss Miranda would call at the Library in the afternoon. And sometimes the young ladies from the Vicarage would come in and run round the shelves like butterflies, brightening up the place. Otherwise Prudence Driver's life was a dull one.

The Public Laundry and Bath-houses were as deserted as the Library.

After the work of nearly a whole year, was there nothing?

Yes; one thing there was. When the Squire, at vast expense, hired a whole circus company and had performances open to all the people—just as if they had been so many ancient Romans—for nothing, they appreciated the act at its highest possible value. Never was any performer more popular than the clown. And yet, in spite of the temporary popularity which accrued to him by reason of the circus, Alan did not feel altogether as if the success of this experiment was a thing, to the student of the Higher Culture, altogether to be admired. It was much as if a great tragedian were to step suddenly, and by no conscious will of his own, into the position of a popular Tom Fool.

Keenly conscious of this, Alan next got a company of comedians. They were going about the country playing a piece which had been popular in London. It was not a great piece, not a play of that lofty ideal which Alan would have preferred to set before his people, but it was something better than the clown's performance. On the first night the villagers came in a body. They expected another clown. What they saw was a set of men and women in ordinary costume, carrying on and talking just like so many ladies and gentlemen. That was not acting at all. No real interest in it; no red-hot poker; no tumbling down and dislocating limbs; no spectacle of discomfiture and suffering such as calls forth at once the mirth of the rustic mind. The next night nobody came but a few children. Clearly, the dramatic instinct was as yet but feeble."

About this time Alan had a great consultation. It was in Desdemona's "cell,"—a luxurious apartment at the Abbey—on Sunday afternoon. Those who were present at the Conference were Desdemona herself, Miranda, Tom Caledon—who was rather short of temper in consequence of discovering that Nelly had gone for a walk with Mr. Roger Exton—Mr. Rondelet, and Alan himself.

The Abbey was very quiet that afternoon; the drowsy influence of the midsummer day lay upon all, and made them talk languidly and dreamily.

"After a year of work," said Alan, lying back in his chair and speaking to the ceiling, "there is nothing." He raised himself and addressed Miranda. "I told, you, Miranda, at the very outset, that Habit was the great enemy. I begin almost to believe that nothing can be done against that deadly enemy."

Then Mr. Rondelet, standing by the open window, toyed delicately with his eye-glass which he half raised twice, and as often dropped. I really believe that he could see as well without it. Then he stroked his smooth cheek and smiled languidly.

"You have proclaimed," he said . . . there was always a little difficulty about Mr. Rondelet's *r*'s, which had a tendency —a tendency only, not a brutal determination—to run themselves into *w*'s. Mankind are divided in opinion as to whether this is affectation or a congenital infirmity . . . "You have proclaimed," he said, "the responsibilities of wealth. You have set an example which may be followed and must be quoted."

"It will be quoted," said Tom Caledon, who was sitting by Desdemona. "It will be quoted most certainly, but as for being followed——"

"I have made an experiment," said Alan, "in what I believe to be the right method. But the success has not been, I confess, altogether what I could desire. It seems almost impossible to enter into their minds."

"Perhaps," murmured Desdemona gently—"Perhaps, Alan, they haven't any."

"And, perhaps," said Mr. Rondelet, "there is still something to be said in favour of the old method of imposing obedience and laying down rules. Our ancestors assumed to possess what *we* certainly do possess—the Higher Intelligence."

"That is driving, not leading," said Alan. "My principle is the Example. It was an old Oxford principle, Rondelet."

Miranda observed with a sigh, that she had hoped to see some development in the direction of Art.

It was an unfortunate remark, because the failure of the Picture Gallery was the most conspicuous of all Alan's late defeats. No one, after the first day, cared to go into the Picture Gallery at all.

"I hoped," said Alan, "that we should make the gallery into a sort of silent and continuous educator. That series of pictures showing the development of manhood from the flint-weaponed savage to—to——" here he looked at the Fellow of Lothian College—"to the highest product of modern civilisation, I thought would become at once a stimulus to the discontent I want to engender."

"Even the contemplation of the—the Highest Modern Product failed to interest them?" asked Mr. Rondelet, with a show of carelessness as if he did not know that in the neglect of the Highest Modern Product he had himself been neglected.

"Yes; they took no interest in the progress of civilisation. Then I had a series to illustrate the History of England. But they cared nothing about the History of England."

"There were the dances," said Miranda, joining in the chorus of lamentation. "Oh! I did hope that something would come of the dances. A weekly dance, with an inexpensive supper—a real dance—of quadrilles and waltzes for the people. It seemed so delightful. And to think that we should break down from such a trifling cause as boots."

"Did they," asked Desdemona, languidly, "did they try to waltz in the boots of their working hours?"

"Well," said Miranda," the fact is we forgot that detail. On the first night Tom was good enough to give us his assistance.

But there was only one girl. Alma Bostock, who could be made to go round at all, and she being the daughter of the Bailiff, is, I suppose, a little above the rest. Dancing is extinct among the English peasantry. It is a lost art."

"Begin again next winter," said Desdemona. "Provide plenty of thin shoes, and I will go down and teach them how to dance."

"You must give them a supper too," Miranda said, "otherwise they will certainly not come. They are like little children, who must be approached by the temptation of something to eat."

"The night-school has to be shut now, Miranda," continued Alan gloomily. "We have been going on for some time with a single pupil, Prudence Driver's brother. I have reason to believe that she bribed him into attendance, and that, as she is at the end of her resources, he refuses to attend any longer."

"Then," said Tom, "as you have gone quite through the whole of your projects, and they are all dead failures, I suppose you are ready to come back to civilisation again."

"And own to failure?" Alan replied. "Not yet. The last word has not been spoken."

Then Mr. Rondelet, leaning against the open window-frame and letting his white fingers roam daintily about his smooth cheek, spoke low and in a certain measured accent, as if the warmth and sunshine of the afternoon had entered into his soul.

"You have shown the way, Dunlop. You have taken the place which an Oxford man of our school was bound to take. You have illustrated what *should* be and what *will* be, perhaps, in the fulness of days. You have also shown how immeasurably in advance of the age is that school to which you belong. The common herd now know what it is—the Higher Life. You have done, we think," he spoke as if he was in himself the Common Room of *Lothian*—"enough for honour. In the centuries to come the tale will not be allowed to drop and be forgotten. It will grow and spread from this little centre of Weyland village till it becomes a great mythus. In the course of the generations, antiquaries will be trying to trace back your legend to the far more remote birth of the Sun-God Fable, and the allegories of Vishnu, Moses, Tammuz, and Apollo. It will be demonstrated that Alan Dunlop's history, as preserved in a fragmentary condition, was an allegory, constructed slowly and bit by bit, of the progress of the year. You will be relegated to the præhistoric period. Treatises will be written to show that your *cultus* existed before Homer, and is referred to in the Iliad; that it was a branch of the great Aryan family of tradition, in spite of the inevitable German scholar who will try to make you out Semitic. And with all the talk no one will be able quite clearly to separate you from Hercules, Samson, or Apollo. You are doomed to become præhistoric. Round your name will gather proverbs, sayings, legends, and miracles. You will be accepted, and even worshipped as the Founder of a new religion; men will dispute first on the genuineness of the miracles, then on the authenticity of the records; and lastly, on the broad fact whether you ever really existed or not. In fact, I see very well and clearly prophesy that everybody in the future will have to become Dunlopians or Anti-Dunlopians, and a High Place for your Worship will be set up in the village of Weyland. So far, at least, you have succeeded."

Desdemona clapped her hands, and even Miranda, who was not always pleased with Mr. Rondelet's remarks, laughed. Alan alone did not seem to appreciate the fulness of the glory prophesied.

"Another thing you have done," said Tom, the practical, "is that, with your three shillings a week for your farm-labourers, and your free feeds, the whole village has grown fat. I met two men yesterday, once thin, who positively waddle. They now bear before them, like an alderman——"

"And your festivals, Alan," asked Miranda. "Did the last go off well?"

Alan hesitated for a moment.

"So far as the children were concerned," he said, "we got on very well. The Vicar was there, with the girls, and we amused them. The women were less easy to please, and I am sorry to say that, owing to some confusion about the orders for beer, the men all got drunk. We left them behind, lying on the roadside in different stages of intoxication."

"It will be reported," said Mr. Rondelet, "in the *mythus*, that the young god was such that those men who gazed upon his face fell to the earth instantly, as if they were drunken with new wine: but that the women followed him singing hymns."

"We went to Weyland Priory," said Alan, unheeding. "I lectured in the ruins, but who knows with what result?"

There was silence for a space. And then Mr. Rondelet left the open window and sought a chair which stood in the midst of the group, just as if it had been left there for the Master. And laying his chin upon his left hand, in such wise that the forefinger and the second finger were parted and lay on either side of his mouth, and sitting so that the elbow of the left arm rested on the chair, he spoke slowly:

"I have brought myself to think, notwithstanding all the talk we had in Oxford, when we were younger men, Dunlop, that the great men—the giants—of the Renaissance were right in leaving the common herd to their own devices. They lived like gods, apart, and enjoyed by themselves the true pleasures of the Higher Culture."

This Fellow of Lothian could never utter a dozen sentences without lugging in the Higher Culture.

"Had they gone below, had they tried to improve, to change the vulgar crowd, they would have lost the cream and glory of life. In these days there is again a small school of Humanists —chiefly or wholly sprung from Oxford—of whom the world knows little. Therefore we live by ourselves. Shall we not, then, live *for* ourselves? Perhaps fate—the gods—chance—may throw in the way of one or two"—he looked, perhaps accidentally, at Miranda—"a companion, a woman, whose social and æsthetic taste may be our own, and whose lines of Culture may be the same. What more delightful life may be imagined than an atmosphere of Art among a little circle, from which all ignoble people will be excluded, all contact with the uncultivated hedged out? This Abbey of Thelema partially, but only partially"—here he looked at Tom Caledon, as if that young man marred with his broad shoulders and stalwart figure the delicate effeminacies of his ideal—"only partially, I say, realises my ideal. So hedged in, our lives would become first a mystery and then an example to the admiring world; and in this way Culture would be helped by emulation. This, however, Dunlop, is a different method from yours. What do you think, Miss Dalmeny?"

"Your method seems to me the highest form of selfishness," she replied.

"But to return to your project, Alan," said Desdemona. "Are you quite sure that you began in the right way?"

"I still think so," he said. "The fault is with me, not with my method."

"Everybody who has a method thinks that," said Tom Caledon. "I like having none, and using the world as I find it."

"The clown of to-day," said Desdemona, "is the clown of yesterday and of to-morrow. But if you really hope to make any change you must begin with the children. And for that purpose you want a woman's help. You must have a wife, Alan."

He gazed intently upon his adviser for a few moments, and was silent. And presently they began to talk about other things, and the church bells rang out pleasantly beyond the park, making the soft air of the summer day melodious, And the three men fell to thinking about the same subject, each from a different point of view. For Tom was in love, and wanted to carry that sentiment to a legitimate conclusion by marriage; and Alan was in earnest, and thought to complete his experiment by marriage; and Mr. Rondelet was in debt, and wanted to clear off his liabilities, and make himself free from similar annoyances for the future by marriage.

CHAPTER XVII.

"Friendship is constant in all other things
Save in the office and affairs of love."

ALAN mused over Desdemona's advice for the whole of the next week. His solitary work in the fields made him introspective, and he was beginning to find out reasons for his failure in the defects of his own character. His great defect, of which he was unconscious, was that he lacked that *bonhomie* which is infectious, and spreads from man to man, like a ball which is caught up and thrown from hand to hand. He was a grave man, and to the rustics he appeared as a schoolmaster or as a clergyman, always preaching unpleasant things, to which one had to listen.

When one of them emerged from the Spotted Lion, after a simple half-pint, it was painful to him, especially if he were a rustic of sensitive disposition, to encounter the deep sad eyes and grave face of the Squire. Had Alan been able to meet that backslider with a hearty round of abuse by way of admonition, something might have been effected. But as the case stood to the village, here was the seigneur of the village come down from his high estate, without any apparent motive except that of meddlesomeness, working among them and for them, dressed as one of themselves, leading the saintliest of lives, more laborious in the field than themselves, more abstinent than any baby; the thing was from the very first disagreeable, and it became in the course of months a matter of profound resentment.

Alan knew that he was personally unpopular among the people, which he attributed to his unfortunate inability "to enter into their minds"; and as has been seen, he did not scorn to seek advice from his friends. There was a general assent among them that it was no use working all day in the fields if none of the men liked to work with him; that the profession of temperance, if no one followed the example, was foolish; and that it was a pity to keep on inviting people to be taught who preferred to remain ignorant, or to wash themselves when they preferred the ancient unwashedness.

From that point they diverged. The Vicar stuck to the principle that men want officers and orders—not superior comrades. Miranda thought that the men should have their wages on the condition of attending night-school, which was a woman's way of looking at things. Mr. Rondelet, clinging to his new views invited Alan to give up the whole thing, and leave swine who liked wallowing, to wallow; "only," he said, "let them have separate sties, a long way from us." And Tom Caledon said that to him it was foolishness; that gentlemen should live with gentlemen; and that in this realm of England people who have the pluck to rise can rise, and even run their sons for the prizes of social position.

And while he was in this dubiety, and while the cold feeling, which damps all enthusiasm, was beginning to creep over him that he might be making himself ridiculous, and sacrificing youth, wealth, and ease for the sake of making rustics snigger, there came this hint from Desdemona, that with the aid of a wife he might at least do something with the children. Of late he confessed to himself with sorrow, he had felt strange yearnings for the old manner of life; and there were moments when there flashed across his mind visions splendid and beautiful, in which Miranda was chatelaine of Weyland Court. But to marry: to have a wife who would share in his aims, and strive to realise his ideas:—but then he thought that for such a wife he must look in the class among whom his labour was to lie. No lady could do what he wanted her to do: a lady, indeed, would fail for the same reason and in the same way that he had failed. His wife must be of the lower class by birth; she must represent their virtues, and be cognisant, by experience, of their failings; she must be able to reveal their sympathies, and show him the avenues by which to reach their hearts. As for the farm-work, he would give that up as useless. The evenings of mental prostration after a hard day of pitchforking were a proof that labour of that kind was useless; and by learning his way to the affections of the people by changing their sentiments towards him so that they should no longer shuffle out of his path, he would be of far greater use than by merely going through the form of companionship in labour.

Whom to marry? He was not a man with a roving eye which lights on beauty here and beauty there. Quite the contrary; he thought very little of beauty—much less than most young men, whose thoughts, I believe, run a good deal on pretty faces: when he did think of beauty at all it was to illustrate the topic with the face of Miranda. Yet it occurred to him at once that the young woman must be comely. Prudence Driver, for instance, who quite sympathised with his views, was out of the question by reason of her unfortunate figure, which was a little twisted. Who, then? But that was a matter of detail, and it would wait. Meantime, he would go over to the Hall, and see Miranda.

Fortunately, Desdemona was with her.

"I have been thinking over what you suggested, Desdemona," he said, calmly.

"What was that?"

"About having a wife."

"The man speaks as calmly as if he were going to buy a horse," said Desdemona.

"The more I think of it, the more I like the idea," Alan went on.

"It is an idea," replied Desdemona, "which has commended itself to all your ancestors; in fact it is with you an hereditary idea—almost a family trait."

"We men lack insight," he said, gravely. "We do our best, but women surpass us in that sympathetic power of vision which pierces the most rugged shell of selfishness and rudeness. You are quite right; I must have a wife, and I want your advice."

"For such a sensible resolve as that, Alan, I will give you as much advice as you can carry away. But had you not better begin by falling in love?"

"Oh! no, not at all. That is not what I mean."

"But you *must*, Alan," Desdemona gasped.—"Was it a dream? Or what *did* he mean?" Miranda looked perplexed and pained.

"No; I am not at all likely to fall in love with the person I marry. Esteem and respect, of course, she will look for."

"But, Alan, what is the meaning? we do not understand you."

"I mean that my wife, in order to be the helpmeet that I want must belong to the lower classes, the very lowest——"

"Good heavens!" cried Desdemona, "is the man going to marry a housemaid?"

"Not a housemaid necessarily; though why not? However, I want to find some poor man's daughter who will understand her class, and help me to enter into their minds."

"My poor Alan," said Desdemona, "they haven't got any minds. I am sure they haven't."

She smiled from the superiority of her knowledge.

"Will you, however, you two friends and allies of mine, the closest and the best, help me to find such a girl?"

It was Miranda who made answer. Her face had gone suddenly pale, and there was a strange light in her eyes.

"I will help you," she said, "in everything. If you think this is the wisest thing for you, you will only tell me what I am to do in order to help you."

"I do not think I can promise, Alan," said Desdemona, slowly. "This is a very serious step which you propose. And I must think of Lord Alwyne."

"You see now," said Alan, "why there need be no question of love."

"But marriage without love? Ah, Alan, you do not know, you cannot guess what that will be."

"No, Alan," said Miranda. "I should not like you to fall in love with a girl of that class. Of course it is impossible."

She spoke with the noble scorn which always seizes a demoiselle at the mere mention of a possibility of a gentleman falling in love with a maid of low degree. And yet she had read of King Cophetua, and the Earl of Burleigh, and Cinderella, and Griselda, and many other cases. Young ladies, indeed, seldom fall in love with the sons of gardeners. Pauline and Claude Melnotte do not form a case in point, because poor Pauline was grossly deceived. Therefore they argue that the reverse case is impossible. They should put a few confidential questions to the shop girls, who might surprise them. But, perhaps, on the whole, they had better not.

"We must not think of love," Miranda repeated. "But you must look for something. Ideas you will not get, nor companionship."

"Not at first. But women are receptive. Companionship will come. For the first thing. I want great power of sympathy."

"Cannot Prudence Driver do what you want without—— ?" Miranda could not bring herself to frame the word.

Alan shook his head.

"No," he replied. "She will not do. I want a wife. It is only by the constant companionship of mind with mind that I can hope to bridge over the gulf between myself and my villagers."

"She ought to be pretty, too," Miranda went on. "I should not like to see you married to a perfectly common woman."

"You will not see me very often," he said; "after I am married I have to put my shoulder to the wheel, and I must not look back, nor regret the days of old."

There was a little bouquet of cut roses lying on the table, which Miranda had brought in from the garden. Alan picked out a bud. "This is a beautiful bud, Miranda—wear it in your hair to-night. I will dine with the Order. It will not be many times more that you will see me among them."

"Oh! Alan." Miranda's eyes filled with tears. She was so stately to all the rest, and to him alone so womanly. "Alan, you will not desert me, will you? What would my life have been—what will it be—without you?"

Had there been in the enthusiast's eyes the slightest touch of softening, Desdemona would have swiftly and suddenly vanished from the room. But there was not. He did not look in her eyes, where love lay hiding, but visible to him, had not his heart been of stone. He was looking far away.

"I must not be tempted, Miranda, even by you. If I marry in the village I shall be tied for life to the village. One must not leave a young wife, even though she has red arms."

Miranda said nothing. The prospect thus suddenly opened was appalling to her.

There was silence, and presently Alan rose to go.

"We are to help you then, Alan," said the artful Desdemona; "but if we are to render any real help you must promise not to act hastily, and without consulting us."

"I promise you," said Alan, "that I will marry no one without your approval. Does that content you, Miranda?"

"It ought to, Alan," she said, smiling rather wearily. "It is very good of you." And then he went away.

"We have got the power of veto, my dear," said Desdemona. "And we will exercise it."

Then she got up and shook her voluminous skirts.

"You GOOSE," she said, addressing no one by name. "Oh! you goose. All men here are geese; but you—oh! you are the most goosely GOOSE. Have you eyes? have you ears? have you understanding?"

"Desdemona dear!"

"Miranda, here is a house full of lively, accomplished, and sweet young ladies. And Alan is a rich, handsome, clever, and pleasant young man. That is all I mean, my dear child—that is all. And again and again I say—oh! you GOOSE! you GOOSE!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

"Idalian Aphrodite, beautiful,
Fresh as the foam new bathed in Paphian wells,
With rosy, slender fingers backward drew
From her warm brows and bosom, her deep hair
Ambrosial, golden, round her lucid throat."

"WE must help him, Desdemona," said Miranda. Her cheek was grown suddenly pale, and there was a strange light of pain in her beautiful eyes, which she lifted heavily as she spoke. "We must help Alan in everything."

"Except in this, Miranda, which is suicide."

"It need not be——quite so bad as it seems."

"It is certain to be much worse than it seems, unless," Desdemona murmured, half to herself, "unless we can stop him in time."

"There must be, somewhere, if only one knew her," Miranda went on, "a girl who would come up to poor Alan's ideal. I have shamefully neglected the poor people, Desdemona, and now this is my punishment."

"That is nonsense, my dear. It is true that you have not gone poking and prying into cottages, like some ladies. But as to neglect——!"

"She must be, first of all, a good-tempered girl. Good temper is such a very great thing."

"It depends," said Desdemona, "greatly on the size of the house. Of course, in a cottage good temper is everything. At Dalmeny Hall or the Abbey you might almost dispense with it. Some day I will write an essay on good temper, especially as required for the stage."

"Good temper, at all events," Miranda went on, "is almost an equivalent for good breeding among poor people."

"Unfortunately, it generally goes with stupidity," said Desdemona. "But that will be part of my essay."

"She must not be stupid. And she must have a soft voice. If possible she should have taste in dress. But I suppose we cannot hope for everything."

"A lady's-maid," said Desdemona, "would perhaps be the nearest approach to Alan's ideal. Can you not spare him your own? And, oh! Miranda, to think that it was my own doing—mine—to put the notion into his dear, queer, cracked brain. What will Lord Alwyne say, when I tell him that it was my suggestion?"

It is not an easy thing to find a village girl possessed of those virtues which were thought by Miranda requisite for Alan's wife. Perhaps she looked for too much. Good temper: gentleness: the germs of good taste: modesty of deportment: refinement in personal habits: ready sympathy: quick wit: and some pretensions to good looks.

Miranda was not above the weakness of her class, which can seldom acknowledge beauty below a certain rank. Ladies would have said, for instance, and doubtless did say, of Nelson's Emma, that she was a person who might be called good-looking by some.—Could all these qualities be found united in one person? And where was that person?

"Let us, like Austria, claim the right to a veto," said Desdemona, "and then we can go on exercising it for the next fifty years or so, until Alan is quite cured of this folly."

"Can we have a fête in the Park, and invite all the girls from Weyland and the villages round? Perhaps we shall be able to see some one who may be thought of."

This idea seemed promising, and Desdemona began to consider how such a fête could be organised.

First, she thought it might consist exclusively of the girls and young unmarried women of the country-side. True that in no rank of life would maidens look forward with rapture, or even complacency, to a gathering in which there were to be no young people of the opposite sex. That was a drawback. Yet Desdemona thought that by prolonging the festivities till late in the evening, a door would be opened, so to speak, for the young people of the opposite sex to meet the maidens, home returning, in the lanes. Desdemona, although cut to the heart to think of assisting at Alan's social suicide, was a kindly person, and thoughtful of her guests' happiness. Then, she thought, independently of the possibilities of a moonlight ramble home, each *sola cum solo*, there would be a novelty in the exclusion of lovers, brothers, fathers, mothers, and babies. There should be no children. The youngest girl should be at least sixteen. Every girl in Weyland village and all the neighbouring hamlets within a radius of six miles should be invited to come, and bring with her every other girl of sixteen and upwards whom she might know.

And then the busy brain of the actress began to contrive means for making the thing into a pageant and a show. She took the Brothers and Sisters, one after the other, into consultation separately and together. Tom Caledon, who volunteered to do anything that was asked of him, except kiss-in-the-ring, thought that if the Brethren alone had to amuse these young persons, there might be jealousies. Nelly observed that if that was the arrangement proposed, she should feel it her duty to put on her habit and ride about as a mounted policeman all the day. Miranda was quite sure that the Monks of Thelema might be safely trusted not to flirt with village girls. All the monks present became at once much graver of aspect than was at all natural or usual with them: and Brother Peregrine, in a sepulchral voice, remarked that monks in all ages were notoriously above suspicion in that respect. Sister Cecilia changed the conversation by asking to be allowed the selection of the music. She was going to have nothing but old English tunes and songs, such as *Green Sleeves*, *Lillibullero*, and so on. The unappreciated novelist suggested a reading, and volunteered to devote the whole afternoon, if necessary, to readings from her own works. Other offers and suggestions were made, considered, and adopted or dropped, until the thing resolved itself into a grand series of entertainments designed to last the whole of the afternoon and evening.

The fête was fixed for a Saturday; it was to be held, if the weather proved fine, in that part of the park which lies between the Court and the little river Wey, which here winds its pretty course, and makes a great tongue of land, in which stand noble elms and sycamores, and where there is a goodly stretch of sloping grass. The grass, however, was covered with tents and marquees, and was gay with Venetian masts and bunting of every kind, so that it was festive to look at. There were tents for everything, including a theatre and a concert room. The whole of the amusements, except the band and the choir of boys, were personally provided by the members of the Order, who were the hosts and hostesses. Only Miranda begged that there should be no waiting on the girls by the Sisters. That part of school feasts and village festivals, she said, where the ladies go round with plates, and do awkwardly what trained servants do well, spoils the pleasure of the guests by making them feel awkward and ill at ease, and turns hospitality into condescension. Miranda was one of the very few people who understand how to give.

The programme was printed in red and gold on silk, so that every girl might carry away and keep hers as a little memento, just as right-minded men love to keep the *menus* of good dinners, and turn to them in after years, with mingled feelings of regret for the excellent things eaten, drunk, and said, on those joyous occasions. And it ran as follows—the red and gold are here unavoidably omitted :

ABBEY OF THELEMA.

Floral Games, July 28, 1877.

To be enacted, represented, and performed for and by the maidens of Weyland Village and the country round.

The games will commence at three p.m. But those who arrive earlier will find dinner laid for them in the long marquee at one. The Band will begin to play at two, and will go on, with intermissions, all the day.

At 3 p.m.—There will be a canoe race on the river between Brother Peregrine and Brother Lancelot. The prize will be permission to bestow a gold locket on any one of the guests.

At 3.30.—The Wizard of Assam.

At 4 p.m.—A game of Polo, in which the Monks of the Abbey will each worthily play a monkly part.

At 5 p.m.—There will be a running race for the younger girls. Prize, a new bonnet, to be selected by the winner.

At 5.30 p.m.—Tea in the long marquee.

At 6.30 p.m.—A Lottery in the Lottery tent.

At 7.0 p.m.—The performance of a new and original village Comedy, written especially for this entertainment by Sister

Desdemona. Music and songs by Sister Cecilia. The characters will be sustained by the Brethren and Sisters of the Order.

At 8 p.m.—A concert of old English music.

At 8.30 p.m.—Dancing and Lighting of the Lamps.

At 9.30 p.m.—Supper in the Long Marquee.

At 10 p.m.—A Grand Surprise, by Brother Peregrine.

At 10.30.—Fireworks.

The guests are invited to enter freely all the tents, especially that of the Gipsy, and that of the Magic Mirror.

GOD SAVE THE QUEEN.

This programme looked very pretty indeed, edged round with flowers, and beautifully printed, as I have said, in red and gold. It was presented to every visitor on arriving at the lodge gate.

There were about a hundred and fifty girls in all. They came from all sorts of places for miles round; they came on foot; they came in spring-carts; they came in omnibuses; they came in vans. They came hours before the time. They came dressed in their very best, and in the happiest mood. But though they knew something of the preparations which had been made, they were not prepared for the splendour and beauty of the scene which awaited them; for the Venetian masts, the streaming banners, the bright tents, the music—which began sooner than was advertised, because there were so many who came as early as noon—and the crowd which went to and fro, and gave life to everything.

There were no men except the servants, for the monks did not appear till the time came for their performances. Ladies there were in plenty, come to see the fête, the real purpose of which was known only to Desdemona and Miranda, but no gentlemen were admitted with them.

I do not think the rural nymphs lamented the absence of their swains. Some few might, perhaps, have allowed a transitory feeling of regret that so much care on their appearance would have no result in attracting some other girl's young man; some might have felt that with a bashful lover at one's elbow things would have seemed more complete. But with most there was a feeling that the shepherd swains would certainly have got drunk, as they did at Mr. Dunlop's festival, and so spoiled everything. Fancy a lot of drunken louts among these beautiful tents and flags.

Village beauty is a flower of not unusual occurrence, as many of my readers have observed. In Gloucestershire there is a prevalent oval type which sometimes gives a face of singular sweetness : in Somersetshire the type is squared off, somehow, and when you get a pretty face there it carries an expression of something like sullenness : the Hampshire folk, with their brown hair and round faces, are sometimes comely : and the Northumbrians, with their long faces, blue eyes, and gentle voices, are often charming. At Weyland Park, which, as everybody knows, is in no one of these counties, the average of village beauty was not, perhaps, very high, but there was plenty of health in the rosy faces, and of vigour in the sturdy arms : considered as the mothers of England's future sons they afforded reason for rejoicing ; but the general type of face was decidedly common. Yet there were exceptions.

No one among them all who could have guessed the real reason of this lavish preparation for a simple girls' merry-making. To Miranda, no expenditure could be too lavish, so that it was for Alan. With a sorrowful heart she provided this magnificent entertainment as a sort of welcome to his wife ; supposing that his wife was amongst the hundred and fifty country nymphs who graced her feast.

The Brothers and Sisters dropped in one by one, and fell into the places assigned to them in the programme. The canoe race was paddled on the narrow little river, as tortuous as the Jordan, by Tom Caledon and Brother Peregrine, and it was won by Tom because his adversary, in his extreme eagerness to win, lost his balance and upset, to the rapturous joy of the assemblage. But some thought that he upset himself on purpose, in order to present the pleasing and interesting spectacle of a figure dripping wet, embellished with duck-weed, and running over the lawns to change flannels. In former days this amusement used always to be provided on Procession-day at Cambridge ; the boats taking it, I believe, in turns to sacrifice themselves on the altar of public derision.

Sister Desdemona presented Tom Caledon with his prize, a gold locket and the permission to give it to whatever girl he pleased. There was a general flutter among the maidens as he stood like a sultan, the locket in his hand. They stood grouped together in little knots, as if jealous of each other ; and all eyes were open, all lips parted in eager expectation of his choice.

There was one girl among them who looked at Tom with a kind of confidence—she alone among them all. She was a fair-haired, blue-eyed girl ; tall, pretty, and of graceful figure.

"Alma thinks she's going to get it," they murmured. "There's lots prettier than her." Tom, however, did not give it to her. He stepped straight to where, quite in the background, little Prudence Driver, Alan's librarian, stood, little thinking of the honour that was about to fall upon her. She was not pretty, nor was she graceful, but Tom knew how Miranda regarded her, and he thought to please the Abbess. An angry flush rose to the cheek of the girl called Alma, but there was no possibility of disputing the award.

The Polo fell rather flat, although the Brothers played well and with address. Polo does not powerfully appeal to the village maiden's imagination.

Then there came the lottery—all prizes and no blanks. The prizes were articles of costume, useful and ornamental. Nelly held the bag, and each girl on drawing her number rushed straight to the lottery-tent to see what was her prize.

Then came the wizard with his Indian conjuring tricks, which made them breathless with wonder and terror, And all this time the music played under the trees; and there was the gipsy's tent, in which your fortune was told for nothing, and you came out knowing exactly not only what kind of husband you were to have, but also, what Mrs. Harris yearned to extort from Mrs. Gamp, your "number."

And then—ah! then—there was the tent of the Magic Mirror. Within, among many curtains, and in a dim twilight, sat an aged white-bearded black man in black robes and wonderful hat, who asked your name and your age, and who then invited you to behold yourself in a mirror. That was not much to do, but as you looked, your own face disappeared, and behind it came a picture—a scene in your future life. And then this remarkable old man told you things. These must have been different, because some of the girls came out with heaving bosoms, glistening eyes, flushed cheeks, and pallid lips, gasping in anticipation of the promised joy. But some emerged with downcast looks, pale and trembling, their day's enjoyment gone. The prophet was no other than Brother Peregrine himself; it was no business of any one's that he had with him in the tent a certain "wise woman" who whispered him little secrets about every girl as she came in. She was invisible behind a curtain. I regret to say that the fame of this wonderful sorcerer spreading upwards, so to speak, many of the ladies and some of the Sisters sought the tent of the Magic Mirror. Among these was Nelly, who came out looking sad and disappointed, and when she met Tom sighed and said, "I am so sorry that I went into the tent of the Magic Mirror. Poor Tom!"

Now Tom knew who was the sorcerer, and he gathered that his rival had taken a mean advantage by means of his magic spells. Therefore he inwardly cursed all necromancers.

Where was Alan? Miranda was disappointed at his absence. He had faithfully promised to come—and now evening was approaching and the beauty of the fête was over, but there was no Alan.

The play, which was a light burletta, with village girls and pretty songs, was well received, and the concert was endured. And then they began to dance, for the sun was down now, and the summer twilight was fallen upon the trees and the park, and they were lighting the coloured oil lamps. It was a new Vauxhall, only none of those present could remember the splendours of that place. And what with the coloured lights and the band and the glamour of the whole, a sort of intoxication seized the girls, and they became, in a way, possessed of the Bacchante madness, insomuch that they laughed and sang, and seized each other by the waist and whirled round madly till they fell. And among them all ran in and out that tall thin man, with the lines in his face, whom they called Brother Peregrine, who whispered to one and danced with another and conjured for a little group, all at the same time, and with unflagging activity.

As for the rest of the monks, they were dancing with such as knew how to dance, except Mr. Caledon, whom all the girls knew; and he walked up and down among the lights with Miss Despard, whom they knew as well. And her face was melancholy. And Miranda moved here and there, always graceful, always queenly, with her little court, consisting of Desdemona, Cecilia, and Mr. Rondelet, happy in her experiment but for one thing, that Alan, for whom this entertainment was designed, was not present.

At ten the supper was served. There was a sort of high table at which sat Miranda, with her court. She was looking up and down the long rows of girl-faces before her with a critical but disappointed eye.

"They giggle dreadfully," she whispered to Desdemona, who was sitting beside her.

"People who live far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife generally do giggle," Desdemona replied.

"And I am not at all sure about their temper. Look at that black-haired girl; should you think she was good-tempered?"

"Certainly not," said Desdemona. "I know the sort—short of patience, hasty in wrath, and unreflecting in the matter of punishment. She would box Alan's ears every day till he brought her to Weyland Court."

"I have looked up and down the rows at the table; but I can see no one who in the least degree approaches Alan's simple ideal. I despair!"

"So much the better, my dear, because the fancy may pass away. We have always got our right of veto. Just suppose, however, that these girls knew what we know. Fancy the airs, the bridlings, the jealousies with which these Cinderellas would receive the gracious Prince when he came. I suppose, by the way, that he will come some time this evening?"

"He said he would. One would think," said Miranda, with a little bitterness, "that he would feel some little interest in the assembly."

But supper seemed to be over. What was the surprise promised by Brother Peregrine?

He answered the question himself; that is to say, his Indian servant brought him a small box. With this in his hand, he begged Miranda's permission to make a little speech.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I am going to minister to their vanity," he replied. "In my experience of the uneducated—only the uneducated portion—of your sex, I have found that to minister to their vanity is to afford them the most lively gratification. I am going to make one girl supremely happy, two or three madly envious, and the rest proud of their sex and of themselves."

He took Miranda's permission for granted, and advanced to the front, facing the long tables at which the girls had taken supper.

"Girls," he said, holding solemnly before him the mysterious box, "I promised you a surprise with which to close the day. It is here, in this box. In the days when the old gods pretended to govern the world, and made such a mess of it that we have been ever since occupied in setting things to rights which they blundered over, there was once a banquet—not so good a banquet as this at which we have just assisted, but still a creditable feed. And while the gods were sitting over their wine and the goddesses looking at each other's dresses"—the girls began to wonder what on earth all this unintelligible patter meant—"some one, who shall be nameless, threw among the assemblage a golden apple—a golden apple," he repeated, "on which was inscribed, 'For the Fairest.' The adjudgment of this apple produced great disasters to the human race, which mattered nothing to her who received it, because she scored a distinct triumph over her rivals. This preamble brings me to the box. Trumpeters, if you please."

The two trumpeters of the Abbey, who had meanwhile stationed themselves at either side of the speaker, but on a lower step, blew a great and sonorous blast.

"This golden apple," the orator went on, "supposed to have been quite lost for many thousands of years, has been miraculously preserved to the present day. It is in my possession; it is in this box. I am about to restore it to its original use. Trumpeters, if you please."

While they blew again, the attention of the girls being now thoroughly aroused and their interest excited to the highest point, Brother Peregrine opened the box, and took out, suspended by a silver chain, an apple, wrought, or seeming to be wrought, in solid gold.

He handed this to his Indian servant, who, bearing it reverently on a cushion, passed down the lanes of the girls, allowing them to hold it in their hands, to weigh it, and to gaze at it. The dark Indian, with his turban and white tunic, the silver chain and the golden apple, and the mystery of the whole thing, filled all hearts with a trembling eagerness.

"That apple," continued Brother Peregrine, "is offered to the fairest of you all. The ladies of the Abbey of Thelema do not propose to enter into competition. It is for their guests alone that this gift is offered. Point me out the fairest."

There was first a dead silence, and then a confused hubbub of tongues, but no one was proposed.

"This will not do," said Tom Caledon. "Let them separate into committees and vote."

It was difficult, but was effected at last by the process of dividing them into groups of ten, and making them select the two prettiest girls from among themselves. This reduced the number of candidates from a hundred and fifty to thirty. The thirty were then ranged in a row, while their less fortunate sisters sat behind, silent, and devoured by irrepressible envy.

"The number must be still further reduced," said Brother Peregrine. "I must have three presented to me, among whom I shall choose the fairest."

Again Tom Caledon managed the business. He gave them voting-papers and collected their votes.

There were thirty voters.

When the papers were unfolded it was found that there were thirty nominations.

It thus became apparent that every girl had voted for herself.

This was discouraging, but Tom began again, offering each girl two votes.

The result of this method was that there was a distinct and large majority in favour of three girls, whom Tom Caledon placed before the giver of the apple, in a row, and then retired.

It was an impressive scene.

On the platform stood Brother Peregrine—tall, thin, with a smile in his eyes, though his lips were firm. Below him his Indian servant, bearing the apple and the chain on a cushion. At either hand the gorgeous trumpeters. Behind, the ladies and the Brethren of the Abbey. The three girls standing trembling with ill-disguised impatience, edging away involuntarily from each other like guilty persons. And behind, the crowd of girls pressing, swaying, laughing and whispering

"They are all three pretty," whispered Miranda to Nelly; "and all three in different styles."

The first was a tall girl, with perfectly black hair and plenty of it, done in a careless kind of knot which allowed—though that was perhaps the effect of dancing—one or two braids to fall upon her neck. She carried her head in queenly fashion, and looked straight before her into the face of the man who represented the shepherd of Mount Ida, with a pair of full lustrous black eyes, which were what some ladies might call bold. Her features were regular: her mouth was rather large, and her figure full. Her limbs were large, and of generous contour. She was Black Bess—her Chrissom name was Pamela, but everybody always called her Black Bess—the daughter of the blacksmith. She was the girl of whom Desdemona had said that, if Alan's choice fell upon her, she would box his ears every day until he took her to reign at Weyland Court. And she looked it. As for forwarding his schemes in the village, or laying herself out for the Higher Culture, whatever intentions in this direction she might start with, the end of those intentions was apparent.

She wore white muslin with cherry-coloured ribbons, which would have been in excellent taste, and suited her shape and complexion, but for an unlucky yellow sash which revealed the imperfectly-educated taste, and made Miranda shudder. In her hand she carried her hat by the ribbons, and her face expressed the eagerness of tumultuous hope.

Next to her, the second of the chosen three, was a girl not quite so tall as Black Bess, but with a figure as commanding and a look as queenly. She had brown hair and hazel eyes, but the eyes were as cold as those of Black Bess were full and lustrous. Her hair was piled and rolled upon her head so that it resembled a helmet. Her features were more prominent than those of her rival, and had a certain hardness in them. Also her chin was a little too long and square, and her forehead a little too high. She wore a dress of some soft lavender colour, without any ribbons, but a rosebud at her neck, and another in her hair. And she, too, carried her hat by its ribbons.

"See," whispered Miranda. "She has taste. But what a cold expression!"

She was a nymph from a neighbouring village; Black Bess and the third were Weyland girls.

The third, indeed, was no other than the bailiff's daughter, Alma Bostock. She was less in stature than the other two, but as graceful in figure, and far more lissom. She was a buxom, healthy-looking damsel, about eighteen years of age, with light-blue eyes, and light-brown hair which fell behind her and over her shoulders in an abundant cascade: she had a rosy cheek and a white forehead: she had red and pouting lips, with a little dimple in either corner: her nose was just a little—perhaps—tip-tilted. She had thrown aside her hat, and was standing with clasped hands and trembling figure, her eyes fixed eagerly on the golden apple, mad to win the prize of Beauty. She, like Black Bess, was dressed in white, but she had blue ribbons, and there was nothing whatever to mar the simple taste of her costume. Indeed her mother, the ex-lady's maid, superintended it personally, and made her discard every scrap of colour, out of all the ribbons which Alma wished to wear, except the simple blue. So that of all the girls at the fête, there was only one, the tall, brown-haired damsel beside her, who was so well and tastefully attired.

And then Brother Peregrine, taking the prize from his servant—at which act the eyes of the Chosen Three lit up suddenly, and became wistful—dangled it thoughtfully before them for a few moments, and then began, slowly and with hesitation to speak.

"I am not Paris," he said. The elected wondered what he meant, while the Monks and Sisters of Thelema pressed more closely behind him, wondering what would happen; Miranda vexed that Alan was not there, and yet half afraid that if he came he might take some sort of fancy to one of the Three. "I am not Paris, the shepherd of Mount Ida. Nor is this, indeed, the mountain. And what I hold in my hand is not, I am sure, an Apple of Discord. You, my very lovely young friends"—here he cast an eye upon Nelly, on whose face there might have been seen a half-amused, half-contemptuous glance, as if nobody under the rank of a lady *could* be called lovely—"are not goddesses, it is true. You are not Hêrê: nor you Athênê; nor you, pretty damsel with the light-brown hair, Aphroditê. Yet, at this important juncture, I feel as if you were, respectively, those three divinities."

He stepped down from his position of vantage.

"Let me try the chain upon the neck of each," he said. "Advance, maid of the ebon locks and lustrous eyes."

Black Bess understood the look, though the language was too fine for her, and stepped forward promptly.

"Let us see," said Brother Peregrine, "how the chain looks round your neck." He threw it over her neck, and, as he did so, whispered quickly: "What will you give me for it?"

"I will teach you," whispered the half-gipsy girl, hotly and eagerly, "how to wire hares and pheasants, how to cheat at cards, so that no one shall know how—oh! I've taught lots of men—and how to tell fortunes, and steal away girls' hearts."

He laughed, took the chain from her neck, and called the next one.

"What will you give me," he asked, "if I let you have the apple?"

Perhaps she had heard the former question, and had time to make up an answer.

"I will tell you," she whispered, "what girls talk about—ladies too—and what they want, and then you will never be afraid of your wife, and rule your own house."

It was an odd thing for a village girl to say; but perhaps she had read books.

"It is the truest wisdom," Brother Peregrine murmured in reply. "And if knowing your wife was the first step to ruling her, one might be tempted. But I have known husbands who knew their wives quite thoroughly, and yet were ruled by them."

He took the chain from her neck, and called the third girl.

"What will you give me for it?" he whispered, as he put it on.

"Give me the apple and the chain," she whispered, with quivering lips. "Give them to me, and I will give you as many kisses as you like."

Brother Peregrine, with a virtuous frown, took off the chain, and returned to his platform. The excitement was at its highest.

"It is mine," he said, "to award the prize. I have seen the three candidates, I have spoken to them; I have, before you all, tried them. Girls, I wish there were three golden apples. But there is only one. And a precedent has been laid down for us. Like the Idæan shepherd, I adjudge the prize—to Aphroditê."

He stepped down, and laid the chain once more round the neck of Alma Bostock.

The other two girls, without a word, turned away, and, with heavily-laden eyes, pressed through the crowd, and so into the outer night. Under the trees, beyond the light of the coloured lamps, they spoke to each other.

"What did she promise to give him?" asked Black Bess, with heaving bosom and parted lips.

"I don't know—I don't care. A Cat," replied the other.

Then they separated by the space of two yards and a half, and, sitting down upon the grass, broke into sobbings and cries.

But within the marquee it was the hour of Alma's triumph. There was a murmur of approbation as Brother Peregrine suspended the chain round her neck. Indeed, she *was* the prettiest, and, at that moment, as she stood there, her eyes brightened, her cheek flushed, the silver chain round her neck, the golden apple at her heaving breast, every eye upon her, the hands of all applauding, her whole frame swaying beneath the excitement and victory of the moment, Alan Dunlop entered the marquee. Miranda, Nelly, and Desdemona, with the other Sisters, were stepping from the platform to congratulate the victor; the band was striking up a triumphant march; the girls were all laughing and talking together. Alan concluded, rashly, that the whole thing had been got up by Miranda for his own benefit. In this sweet-faced village girl, the queen of the festival, he saw the maiden whom Miranda had chosen for himself, and he caught her hand with effusion.

"Miranda," he whispered, with the deepest feeling, "you have found for me the girl I have been in search of. I thank you—for a wife."

CHAPTER XIX.

"The rank is but the guinea stamp,
The man's the gowd for a' that."

"All is lost, my dear," cried Desdemona when the fête was over, and the pair were sitting alone at midnight in Desdemona's cell. "All seems lost, that is; because while there is no wedding-ring there is hope. But to think that we have fooled away our right of veto!"

Miranda could only sigh.

"The sight of that girl, looking really beautiful, *for* a girl in her position," continued the elder lady, making the usual reservation, "finished the man."

"And he thinks," said Miranda bitterly, "that I got up the whole scene for the sake of advising him! I even to dream of his marrying Alma Bostock!"

"It has been all my doing!" Desdemona said in sorrowful accents. "All mine. I told him he ought to marry; I devised the fête. I arranged the Surprise with Brother Peregrine. I only am to blame. And yet, it is fate."

Then Miranda began to take comfort out of what comfort remained.

"After all," she said, "if he is going to marry a country girl, he might easily do worse. Alma Bostock will never rise to his level, but she may be sympathetic; and perhaps she will respect him. Oh! Desdemona, it is a poor consolation, this 'may-be.' And I feel that I cannot any longer sympathise with Alan."

"No; that would be difficult indeed. A man may make mistakes of all kinds; he may even go and live in a village and pretend to be a farm-labourer; but the mistake of such a marriage he may not make, for Society will never forgive that kind of mistake. A bad marriage——"

Here she stopped, and was silent, thinking, perhaps, of her own married life.

"There ought," she went on, "to be special juries, composed entirely of married men—and they should be gentlemen, not greengrocers—to consider cases of mistakes in marriage; and divorce should be granted as the only relief. Poor dear Alan! Poor mad Hamlet! Go to bed, my dear Ophelia, and sleep with happy dreams, while I think how I can alter the last act of the play, and turn it into 'All's Well that Ends Well.'"

And when the next day Lord Alwyne came on a visit to the Abbey, Desdemona received him in fear, not daring to tell of the impending trouble. He began to talk at once about his son.

"I have seen Alan sitting in a labourer's cottage, with a stone floor and a deal table. I have also seen him masquerading in a smock-frock, with a cart. And after that, Desdemona, I felt that there was no further room for astonishment whatever the misguided boy might do. It is not a pleasant thing, however, for an old-fashioned father to see his son's name flourishing in the papers. The other day they had a special column and a half devoted to an account of a visit to Weyland, and an interview with the shepherd Squire, as they were pleased to call Alan."

Desdemona could say nothing in solace, because what was coming was a great deal worse than what had gone before. And they talked of other things.

In fact, Alan came over without delay to communicate his intentions to his father. It was filial of him; and I suppose there were still some remains of ancient prejudice as regards rank and caste about him, because he approached the subject with some hesitation.

"I fear," he said to his father, "that you have no sympathy with my present mode of life."

"Why, no, Alan, I certainly have not."

Desdemona was present; in fact, the interview took place in her "cell," where she and Lord Alwyne had been holding an animated conversation over certain memories of old days—the days when she was young, when there were little suppers after the performance, and little dinners at Richmond on Sunday evenings. Alan's sudden appearance, with his grave face and solemn eyes, rudely disturbed this harmonious duet of reminiscence.

"No, Alan," his father repeated, "I have never attempted the necessary effort at pumping up sympathy for you; it would require too great an exertion: but I pity you, my dear boy. I find I can manage so much without fatigue."

Alan smiled. He could afford to be pitied; but he could not afford to fail and be ridiculed.

"Perhaps you will pity me more when I tell you what I am going to do next."

"I don't think I could," said Lord Alwyne lazily. "All my available pity, now that my old friends and I have to pity each other for the loss of youth, is yours already. There is only a certain amount of pity in every man's constitution. Men differ in this respect, however, as they differ in weight. You may try, if you like, Alan."

"I have been long thinking upon the best way to bridge over the gulf which divides me from the mind of the labouring classes."

"I thought you had answered it by jumping into the gulf, just as young Parisians, who think that everything is finished, jump into the Seine. But if that did not do——"

"It did not quite. In fact, I have had to confess lately that my experiment has in some respects been a failure."

"Aha! Now I am really glad to learn that. I am interested this time. Then, Alan, I hope that you will give up masquerading as the homely swain, and come back to our arms as the country gentleman again. Desdemona and Miranda will forgive you, and all shall be forgotten. We will never allude to the dreadful past again."

Alan shook his head.

"Not yet, sir, I think. Most likely not at all; because I am now going to commit myself to an act which is also experimental, and yet, if it fails, can never be undone."

"That sounds very serious. Do you know what he means, Desdemona?"

"I am afraid I know too well."

"In fact," continued Alan, not facing his father's eyes, but uneasily playing with the ornaments on the mantelshelf, "I have come to the conclusion that the only way for one class to understand another is for them to intermarry."

"I see," said Lord Alwyne slowly, while a look of pain and disappointment crossed his face. "I see—and you propose—yourself—to intermarry with the class which is the lowest. Is that so?"

"That is what I mean."

"Do you wish to introduce this as a general practice or t illustrate in your own case how the theory works?"

"I live in the way I think best for carrying out my own ideas," said Alan, with a little pride. "Others may follow me or not, as they may think best. I am only sorry that my proceedings must shock your feelings."

"Nothing shocks me," said Lord Alwyne untruthfully; "I am too old to be shocked by anything. And, besides, your idea is not a new one. Royal houses have often bridged over the gulf by marriage — morganatic. By means of the female branches, indeed, all ranks of society must have been by this time thoroughly understood by the higher class. But, pray go on."

"I am perfectly serious," said his son. "To intermarry with a family of the soil will be to create new sympathies, and establish ties which may lead to all sorts of valuable results. We will suppose that I am married to—to a girl of this village, poor, of course, but creditably brought up by respectable parents, endowed with as much mother-wit as any of her superiors, able to give me her experience in dealing with the class from which she sprang. . . ."

"The situation is novel," said Lord Alwyne; "but I doubt if my imagination can follow it in all its consequences. . . ."

"Well, but will it not afford me opportunities such as I could gain in no other way, of influencing the villagers? They will look on me as one of themselves: I shall be their cousin, their brother . . . You think this wild enthusiasm, I suppose?" he said in an altered voice.

"No, my son, not at all; I think nothing. You have the advantage of me by thirty years. That is a great pull to begin with. I shall not try to understand where the modern ideas come from, nor whither they tend. It might make me uncomfortable. It might even make me want to follow you, and, like Don Quixote, go a-shepherding in my old age. That would be detestable. But I confess I am interested. Let us see; you marry this girl. You are therefore the cousin of half the village at once. That will, as the first obvious consequence, enable them to borrow money of you. You will live here, at your own place?"

"No; I shall live in the village. Only I shall get a more comfortable place than I am in at present."

"That will be in some respects better. As to your wife's relations, now: they would be free of the house?"

"Surely; that is part of my purpose. It would be an education for them to see how a household may be simply conducted on principles of the best taste."

"In case of a dinner-party, now, or an evening——"

"We should give no dinner-parties."

"I was only thinking," said Lord Alwyne softly, "of an elementary difficulty—that of evening dress. Excellent as your new relations would be in all the relations of life, I suppose that a dress-coat is not considered necessary in their circle?"

"Surely," said Alan, "in such a matter as this we need not stop to discuss evening dress."

"Indeed, no. As the poet says:

"'The rank is but the guinea stamp,
The man's the gowd for a' that.'

The matter only occurred to me in thinking of what your own prejudices might be. Mere prejudices. In smock-frock or evening dress, what is a man *but* a man?"

Alan moved uneasily.

"Evening dress—evening dress," he repeated. "What have we any more to do with evening dress?"

"Your wife will be able to receive," pursued his father, "at five o'clock tea. Desdemona, you will describe to me by letter, I am sure, how the Sisters of Thelema got on with the gentle—I mean the *employés* in smock-frocks. It will be almost like a scene from the opera . . . By the way, Alan, at such receptions the smocks are clean, I suppose?"

"My dear father, I am serious."

"So am I, my son—so am I. Never more so, I assure you."

Lord Alwyne's words were genial enough, but his manner was cold. Alan knew without these symptoms what his father's reception of his grand project would be.

"And when you return to the Hall, with your wife, whom you will have trained by that time in your cottage to the outward semblance, and perhaps the bearing, of a lady—what will you do then about the relations? By that time, though, they too will have adopted the manners of polite society, and will be able, I suppose, to hold their own at a dinner or a ball. We shall have the smock-frock in society at last."

Alan made a gesture of impatience. He was thinking of the present, and here was his father making suppositions about the future.

"I shall never go back to the Hall," he said with decision. "My life is devoted to the village."

"Yes: that is noble. But what about the children? I suppose we may contemplate that possibility? You cannot leave Weyland Court to any one but your eldest son. He will, I suppose, be trained to occupy his position as a gentleman!"

Alan refused to contemplate the possibility of children at all. Children would complicate his proposed arrangements altogether.

Then Lord Alwyne summed up.

He lay back, resting his eyes on the comely proportions of

Desdemona, and speaking languidly, as if, which was the case, the business was beginning to bore him too much to talk about it.

"Of course, Alan, you know, without my telling you, what must be my feelings as regards this project. In the benighted days of my youth I was taught that by birth, by education, and perhaps by the inheritance of those qualities which pushed my fathers to the front and kept them there, I was one of the natural leaders of the people. I chose my line, as my elder brother chose his; and while he very properly accepted the position of politician, a sacrifice which must require a great deal of resolution, I, for my part, preferred to become a leader in society. Up to the present I have seen no reason to regret my choice. The country never had better statesmen or better soldiers than when they all came from one class. And I think it never will again have better, because our men have nothing to gain, either in money or rank. The other classes may produce poets, novelists, artists, lawyers—all sorts of worthy and delightful people—but has not yet produced great administrators or great generals. And, in my opinion, that comes of descent. For work which requires a cool head and unflinching courage in the storms of unpopularity or ill-success you want a man who inherits those qualities. That is my simple creed, Alan. The Fontaines have been to the front for six hundred years or thereabouts. The Dunlops, your mother's people, have been country gentlemen, knights, and soldiers for as long. And all the time we have kept on intermarrying. We have kept to our own class. You will marry out of it. For my own part, I do not wish to bridge over the gulf between myself and my servants; I would rather let that gulf remain. The country allows those to rise who are strong enough to rise. Let the weak stay where they are."

"Social economy——" began Alan.

"My dear boy, let us not begin with social economy. It will teach us nothing. We will discuss this affair no longer. Henceforward, Alan, I shall be very glad to see you, personally, in London, but I can come to Weyland Court no more after you are married."

"I am sorry; I am deeply sorry to pain you, sir," said Alan; "but when higher duty than that of deference to your wishes falls upon me——"

"Very well, Alan," his father interrupted him. "We understand each other, which is quite enough. Go your own way, and forget the old notions, if you please. But I cannot go along with you. Shake hands, my boy; we have not quarrelled, and do not intend to."

Alan went away, his face rendered sadder. Out in the park his eyes suddenly lit up, and he raised his head. Was he thinking of that bright and blooming girl who stood before them all in the marquee, the light of the lamps upon her face, her lips parted, her bosom heaving, her eyes dancing with pride and joy while Brother Peregrine gave her the golden apple ? It is quite possible. Man is but man. Even Aristotle, as everybody who has read the "Lay of Aristotle" knows, succumbed to a pretty face. And as Alan proposed to marry her, he was *dans son droit* in letting his thoughts run upon his future wife. But perhaps, after all, he was thinking how Miranda would approve of this additional self-sacrifice.

When he was gone, Lord Alwyne turned to Desdemona, raising his hands before his face, palms outward. It is the gesture of sorrow, disappointment, or disgust.

"Poor Alan!" he said—"poor boy! All his fine theories have come down to this ; to live in a cottage, work as a common labourer, and marry a labouring man's daughter. I always told my wife that bringing him up at home would be his ruin. Marry a labourer's daughter!—bridge over the gulf!—oh! Desdemona, for the first time in my life I regret that we are not in France, before the Revolution, and that I cannot get a *lettre de cachet.*"

"He is not married yet," said the actress.

"Not yet ; but he will be married before long."

"I say he is not married yet."

"Do you mean, Desdemona, to hold out hopes ?"

"I do," she said. "I will tell you nothing more : but I have hopes, and I shall set to work."

Lord Alwyne reflected.

"I will not ask now," he said. "I would rather not know. I cannot plot against my son. But, Desdemona, in memory of our long friendship, help me if you can."

She did not answer for a while, sitting in thought. Presently her clear eyes became heavy with tears.

"Ours has been a long friendship, Lord Alwyne," she said, "and it is my greatest pleasure to think about it. It is thirty years since first you stood by the young actress and protected her reputation against cruel attacks that were made upon me, and are always made on women of my profession. I am grateful for that. And it is five and twenty years since when, in my day of trouble, there was no one in the world but you who had the courage to take me away from it, and to do it openly, so that no one could throw a stone. As dear as my honour is to me, Lord Alwyne, so deep is my gratitude to you."

Meantime in Alan's brain was ringing the name of the girl he had seen last night, her face lit up and surrounded as by a nebula of joy and pride.

"Alma Bostock."

And while the name went clanging in his brain, he began to think of his future father-in-law. The outlook in that direction was not promising.

"He is crafty," said Common Sense.

"He is not a man of broad views, but hard-working," said Enthusiasm.

"You suspect his honesty," said Common Sense.

"That is because I am growing suspicious," replied Enthusiasm.

"He thinks bad beer and you think fine claret," said Common Sense.

"Then we will teach him a liking for claret," said Enthusiasm.

And so on, carrying on the conversation for a mile and a half, until all that could be said against the worthy Bailiff had been said, and the result remained that if ever there was a fitting subject for the operation of example, precept, and exhortation in the direction of the Higher Culture, Bailiff Bostock was that special subject. And he could be got at readily by means of his daughter, Alma Bostock! Now that the idea of marriage was assuming a concrete form instead of a vague and shadowy umbra, like a ghost to look at and quite as terrifying, it did not seem so dreadful a business. When Panurge was suffering from those cruel doubts of his concerning marriage, he had no one, so far as we have been informed, in his eye. Now Alma Bostock appeared to Alan the very girl made to his hand. There must be, he had always said, some approach to delicacy in his wife. This he could hardly expect to find in the coarse and red-handed daughter of a ploughman. His wife must belong to the class among whom he was about to live. Alma's father was but a step removed, while her mother was herself the daughter of a cottager. Here he made a great mistake. Bailiff Bostock considered himself much more than a step above the labourer. Just as the Queen must find it difficult to understand, even with the help of Miss Yonge's novels, the little distinctions of middle life—how the chemist is a greater man than the grocer: how the smallest professional man keeps apart from trade: how the curate cannot break bread with a retailer—so Alan Dunlop did not understand that his Bailiff stood upon a platform a great deal higher than his labourers, and that Alma, whatever she might do, would certainly not be likely to sympathise with the rustics.

Alma Bostock was the one girl in the village who would do for him—of that he was quite certain. All the rest were coarse, commonplace, repulsive.

He spent an agitated evening, wandering into the library and out of it, talking in a purposeless way with Prudence, his librarian. There was no one else there, of course.

"Prudence, you must be lonely, sitting here every evening, and no one coming here but yourself."

"No, sir, not very lonely; I've got the books."

"We must find some one to come here a good deal, and brighten-up things for you."

He was thinking in some vague way how Alma would set the example of spending an evening or two every week among the books, and how that example would spread. The next morning, instead of going off to the farm work, he put on the ordinary habiliments of an English gentleman, and went over to the farm-house.

It was nine o'clock when he started. Miranda, he thought with a pang, reflecting how his marriage would separate him from her, was at that moment taking breakfast—probably at the Abbey. The members of the Order would be dropping in one by one in their lazy fashion. There would be devising of plans for the day, talking over all the things which rejoice cultivated men and women; and all in the pleasant softness of ease, and art, and luxury. And he was going to cut himself off at one stroke from this Castle of Indolence. Was it yet too late? Yes: the experiment must be tried: his long-matured scheme for the regeneration of mankind must be carried out to the very end. Farewell, Thelema: farewell, Desdemona: farewell, Miranda. For here he was at the garden-gate, and there, in the garden, was the very girl whom he came to woo.

I think that even Miranda, Nelly, and Desdemona, jealous as they are of conceding beauty to women of the lower class, would have acknowledged that Alma Bostock, standing in the garden, made a pretty picture in the morning sunlight. It was a long, narrow garden, sloping down the hill on which the house stood. On either side was an orchard, and stray apple-trees were standing in the garden itself. These were old, and covered with yellow lichen, which contrasted with the dark branches, and the light green leaves. Behind the garden was the farm-house, a picturesque and gabled red brick house, with ivy climbing over one end of it, and throwing arms round the angles so as to embrace the whole house. Facing the garden, a window on either side, was a broad and massive porch of wood-work, round which the creepers clung and clambered. The garden was planted with gooseberry-bushes, currant-bushes, raspberry-canes, and strawberry beds. There was a narrow walk in it from the porch to the garden-gate, bordered with box, and behind the box an edging of flowers—such as gilly-flower, double stocks, sweet-william, candytuft, Venus's looking-glass, London pride, and mignonette—the kind of flowers which require least gardening; and there were a few standard roses close to the house itself. Under the apple-trees, with the soft light of the sunshine broken up into a thousand fragments by the dancing leaves before it fell upon her, stood Alma herself. She was out there to gather red currants, and she had a basket on her arm for the purpose; but she was not gathering currants at all, only standing with head bare, and thrown back, gazing into the distance, lost in meditation.

Alan thought of certain lines of poetry, and his heart softened towards the damsel. She looked dainty all over. Her head was shapely and her profile clear; her dress fitted her pretty figure perfectly; in fact, her mother, formerly lady's-maid to Alan's mother, made it for her. And it was of a soft grey colour, which suited the light greenery of the apple leaves. One of her arms was bare: and it was not a red and blowsy arm—not at all—it was as white as any arm could be, and as well shaped. And on either side of the garden lay the orchard, with little glades of sunlight and of shade. While Alan looked, the girl tied a handkerchief over her head, which set her face in a white frame, and made her look ten times as pretty. So pretty a girl, Alan thought, could not be other than bright and sympathetic, and quick to feel and to respond. Besides, was she not the selection and choice of Miranda?

As for Alma, indeed, opinions among her acquaintance were divided. For her enemies, who were the young women of the place, declared that she was deceitful and treacherous. They also said that she was by no means so pretty as she thought herself. The young men of the place, on the other hand—curious what diversity of opinion may exist in the smallest village—declared that there was nobody so pretty as Alma Bostock. The only objection they had to her was that she held her head so high and made believe to be a lady.

Meantime, she stood beneath the trees, a very pretty picture. Did a painter want to draw the ideal country girl, engaged in the ideal country occupation, he would find no more charming picture than that of Alma in the garden, with her basket ready to hold the ripe red-currants.

A very pretty picture, and a suggestive picture. Alan's thoughts flew with a rush to the Arcadian life he had imagined, which would, with the help of Alma, begin as soon as the wedding-bells should ring.

He lifted the latch, opened the garden-door, and stepped in to begin his wooing

CHAPTER XX.

"Her disposition she inherits, which makes fair gifts fairer."

Alma Bostock saw Mr. Dunlop open the gate and walk up the path without any other emotion than a little surprise that he should be without his contemptible smock-frock. She held him in small respect, considering his self-denying life as a proof of mere feebleness of brain; but he was undoubtedly a man to whom outward respect was due, as the fountain and source of the family well-being. There was perhaps another reason why she regarded Alan with some contempt. It is well known in her class, and among her sex, that gentlemen, of whatever rank, are not insensible to the attractions of pretty girls, even when of lowly birth. Alma had good reasons for knowing this fact. Only a week before, Mr. Caledon, meeting her in a shady lane, while she was balancing a basket on her head, bet her a sovereign that he couldn't kiss her lips without the basket falling off. He lost the bet. And Mr. Roger Exton, the gentleman who gave her the golden apple—made her Beauty-Laureate—the funny man with the lines about his face, walked home with her through the park, when Miss Miranda and the ladies had gone away, and insisted on payment of the promised reward. But from Mr. Dunlop, who was so much about the place, no attention of that or any other kind. No use being the prettiest girl in the village, if you get no compliments by it. Might as well be the ugliest. Mr. Dunlop had eyes for nobody, they said, but Miss Miranda. And yet in no hurry to put up the banns.

If it had been Tom Caledon marching up the path, Alma would have smiled and nodded gaily, sure of a talk and a laugh. As it was only Mr. Dunlop, she made a salutation of ceremony, which was by no means too graceful.

Alan's thoughts were quite simple.

"She is good-looking," he might have said. "A little awkward, which teaching will cure. I wish she would not drop a curtsey. She looks appreciative, as well as pretty. She must be sympathetic and ready, otherwise Miranda would never have selected her. Of course, I am not the least in love with her. How could one be, after Miranda?"

"Good-morning, Alma," he said, taking off his hat, as to a young lady. Alma thought this cold and ceremonious, but quite characteristic of the Squire. "I came over to see you by yourself. Are you alone?"

"To see me, sir?" she asked with wonder. "Yes, I am alone. Mother's gone a-marketing, and father's about the place somewhere."

"Alone. Then we can talk, you and I?"

"Yes, sir." Alma, at sight of those solemn eyes gazing intently and earnestly in her face, felt her ancient respect for Mr. Dunlop increase rapidly, until it almost amounted to terror. "Yes, sir. There is no one here. Will you come in out of the hot sun? Father 'll be in for dinner, and I'll give him your message."

"My message is altogether for yourself, Alma. You may tell your father afterwards if you like."

What on earth was he going to say? Could that rash fellow, Harry, who promised to tell nobody anything, have gone talking to the Squire? It *must* be Harry; and what a rage father would be in! Certainly, Harry's position in society was not that which could be expected of one who would mate with a Bostock.

With these misgivings, Alma led the way into the best room, the apartment reserved wholly for visitors of distinction. It was a room of small dimensions; what, however, it lacked in space it made up in stiffness, like some small dame of dignified and upright bearing, decked in antique bravery. The table had a dozen keepsakes, and such light reading, ranged round it. There were slippery horse-hair chairs, on which no one could sit, unless he held on by the back of the next chair; and a horse-hair sofa, on which if any one had ever tried to recline, needs must that he repent it afterwards. And the artificial flowers on the mantelshelf, and the vases of thirty years ago, and the cheap German prints, and the coldness of the room, whose windows were never opened, struck Alan's heart with a chill. And yet what a room might this be made when the principles of the Higher Culture should have taken root! On the right of the window, the pretty wooden porch, covered with its creepers; on the left, a little lawn, with standard roses; and beyond, the greenery of the orchard. A room whose windows should open to the ground, which should be hung with light draperies, and painted in green and grey, and furnished in black, with just a little china. The girl herself, Alan thought would set off the picture, were she but dressed to correspond with the furniture.

"What is it, Mr. Dunlop?"

He recovered himself, and looked at her again with a curious gaze, half of inquiry, half of hesitation, which frightened her. He could not, really, have seen Tom Caledon—no; that was impossible. And no business of his if he had. It *must* be Harry.

"Won't father do as well, Mr. Dunlop?"

"No," he replied, "he will not do nearly as well."

He sat down, but the treacherous nature of the horsehair chair caused him to abandon this attempt in confusion. Then they both remained standing, rather awkwardly, Alan beside the table and Alma by the window.

"You know," he went on, "what I am endeavouring to effect in this village—and I hope my work has your sympathy, and that you understand its great aim—to increase the love for Culture and the practices of the Higher Life. Your father lends me his cordial aid"—here Alma turned away her face to hide a smile. "You have seen me at work for a good many months. And you have seen, I dare say, that my efforts, so far, have been a failure."

"Well, sir," said Alma, "I always did say that for the Squire to put on a smock-frock like a common labourer and go a-haymaking, and reaping, and hedging with a passel o' village boys was a thing I couldn't hold with. And mother said the same; said my lady would ha' blushed red to see the day. Father, he only said, 'Let him alone.' That's all father ever said. But he's that deep, is father."

"Yes," Alan went on, "we have not succeeded very well, he thinks. Your mother and you were right so far as you understood. And your father, in his rough way, was also right in saying, 'Let him alone.' It is what I expected of him. However, I have found out at last the main cause of my failure, and it is this, Alma—alone and single-handed I cannot do much in the direction of Culture. I can only set an example which may or may not be followed. If I am married now; if I am married to a girl who understood the classes among whom I labour—don't you see, Alma?—I should be working double, not single. Do you begin to understand?"

Not at first. She looked wonderingly in his face. Then, all of a sudden, she did understand, and first she turned red and then ashy pale. Could it be? Was she in her senses? And the Squire, too? And never so much as a chuck under the chin from him to give her warning of what he intended.

"I will repeat," he said, "I want to find a girl who understands as I never can really understand, the classes among whom I work. I want her to marry me in order that I may work with double my present efficiency. I want her to join with me in learning what is best, teaching what is best, practising what is best, and showing by our own example, plain for all to see, the life that belongs to the higher civilisation."

It could not be. But yet—but yet—things looked like it. If the Squire did not mean that, what could the Squire mean?

"Will you," he added, "will you marry me, Alma?"

There was no possible mistake about that invitation. Five words most unmistakable. As Alma looked at Alan with frightened, wonder-stricken eyes, so looked Semelê when Zeus proclaimed his love and told her who he was. So also, but with the sheepishness natural to his sex, young Anchises gazed upon the white-limbed Thetis when she astonished him by stealing up along the golden sands, dripping wet, resplendent in her beauty and radiant with her newborn love. So looked the beggar-maid when she left her barrel-organ and received from King Cophetua, not a royal penny with a royal pat upon her fair cheek, but instead a golden wedding-ring, or the offer of one, when the monarch, in robe and crown, stepped from his throne to meet and greet her on her way The age of that monarch is nowhere mentioned, but it must have been very advanced, and his rash act was doubtless speedily followed by deposition and consignment to the County Asylum.

Alma did not answer—she could not answer—perhaps thinking of Harry. But she looked him straight in the face and tried to understand this wonderful proposal.

In two minutes you can get through a good deal of thinking.

What in the world would Harry say?

Sweet passages—many passages sweet and tender—had gone on between Harry and herself. Would he take it crying, or would he take it swearing?

Then the thought of Weyland Court. Oh—h!

She would be mistress of that beautiful place, where her mother, always full of its glories, had been lady's-maid. She would be the lady—with a carriage to drive in and horses to ride—the equal of Miss Dalmeny, the superior of Miss Despard. And what would Harry say when she drove by resplendent in silk and satin?

Help in his work? What did Mr. Dunlop mean by that?

"Well, Alma, what do you say?"

"I don't know what to say," she replied; "I'm struck of a heap."

Alan shuddered. "Struck of a heap!" But then the training had not begun.

"Miss Dalmeny did not prepare you for this proposal? I thought that she had spoken to you about it."

"Miss Dalmeny!" She opened her blue eyes wider. "Why, what in the world should Miss Dalmeny want you to marry me for? And everybody says that you and she are as good as handfasted, a'ready."

Really, this young woman would require a good deal of training.

"Never mind Miss Dalmeny, then, but consider what I propose. Will you marry me?"

"It *can't* be real," said Alma, scared out of her wits.

How different from Tom Caledon, and, indeed, all the gentlemen with whom she was acquainted. A laugh and a compliment: a kind word or perhaps, if no one was within sight, a kiss—which, in young ladies of Alma's position of life, is neither here nor there, a mere unconsidered trifle. But to stand there cold and quiet, playing with his watch-chain and waiting for an answer!

"It *can't* be real," she repeated, turning the corners of her apron in her fingers.

This may be objected to as a trick of the stage, but all tricks of the stage come originally from life outside the house, and some old fashions linger; therefore, Alma being, as she subsequently described it, in a quandary, the like of which she had never before experienced, turned the corners of her apron in her fingers.

"I thought you had received some intimation," Alan went on, feeling a little pity for the embarrassment of the girl. "I do not come to you, as you see, professing passionate love. That is not at all my motive in offering you marriage. You may, however, depend on receiving all possible kindness and consideration. And I do not invite you to a life of luxury and ease. By no means. You will go on living just as you do now, only with more attention to externals."

She did not understand one single syllable that he said. "Marry her, and go on living as she was accustomed to live?"

"What I want in a wife especially is advice, sympathy, help. She will supplement my own deficiencies of knowledge. I want her to be always at my hand, suggesting the one right way and preventing all the wrong ways. I want her, in fact, to be the Lieutenant in my work. Can you do this, Alma? Can you be this to me?"

She gazed at him in mere stupid bewilderment. Give him—Mr. Dunlop—advice? Give him—the Squire—sympathy? She thought sympathy meant pitying people who are unlucky enough to have fevers, rheumatism, or prison fare. What did he want sympathy for? And then to give him help?

Perhaps he was cracked. People in the village did whisper that the young Squire *must* have a soft place in his head. To be sure, if he had come like a lover should—

> ". . . . the young man, he comes dancing,
> With a 'How do you do, my dear?' "—

if he had told her that because she was such a very pretty girl, and because her eyes were so blue, her lips so rosy, her cheeks so soft, and because she had won the golden apple, which was a clear proof of her superiority, and because she must, being so beautiful, necessarily be good in proportion, therefore he had fallen madly in love with her: then, indeed, she would have believed entirely in his sanity. But to march gravely into the house, to look at her as if he was a schoolmaster and she a pupil who had done wrong things, with those solemn eyes of his, and then to say that he wanted to marry her in order to get assistance in his work—why, the man must be gone clean stark staring mad.

Marry her and go on living as she had been living? Churning butter, perhaps. Oh! yes, and she Mistress of Weyland Court. Likely! And milking cows—and she with her best frock on every day. Or darning stockings—and she with silk ones. Picking red currants—and she with a dozen servants. And perhaps making the beds. Very likely. Work, she imagined, meant this kind of work, and nothing else. He must be mad.

"Come, Alma," said Alan, who had been listening patiently, "what do you say?"

"I don't know," she replied with hesitation, "about helping in your work. But I've always been used to house-work, and I suppose I should be able to learn what you wanted me to learn. Only, I don't understand. But you don't really mean it, Mr. Dunlop? It's only some of your fine gentleman's fun."

The idea of Alan Dunlop ever having manifested any fine gentleman's fun in his life!

"You can't mean it," she went on. "Up at the Court, with all those beautiful Sisters to pick and choose from." Alma's notions of Alan's irresistible charms might have pleased a vainer man, but he received the words with a shudder. Fancy "picking and choosing" among such girls as Sisters Miranda, Rosalind, Cecilia, and the rest. "There's Miss Despard, as beautiful as beautiful. Or there's Miss Miranda herself, like a queen. And yet you come to me and tell me you want to marry me."

Was then the *Droit du Seigneur* ever in force in this country? It never once occurred to Alma that she could refuse so wonderful and surprising a proposal.

To be sure the position was remarkable.

"You do not quite understand as yet, Alma," said Alan, gravely. "With these young ladies there has been no question of marriage. And I propose this—this union—in the hope and belief that by forming new ties—I am afraid, however, that I cannot make you entirely comprehend my views all at once. Trust yourself to me, Alma, and I think you will never have reason to regret your consent."

He held out his hand and she took it. The manners of the upper classes are singularly cold. How different from Harry! Why, only last night, when he took leave after a stealthy and hurried interview at the garden-gate, had he not, with his arm round her waist, given her kisses twain—fair and honest kisses—one on either cheek? Did gentlefolk never kiss each other? If Miss Miranda had said yes, would he not have kissed her? A pang of jealousy crossed the girl's heart. She was not good enough, then, to be kissed?

"We will meet again to-morrow, Alma," said her suitor. "There is a great deal to be talked over. For the present, good-bye."

He was gone, and she, though, with the slender power of imagination at her command, she found it difficult to believe, was actually betrothed to Mr. Dunlop, the owner of Weyland Court.

Alma sat down on the least slippery of the chairs and tried to realise what it all meant. She would certainly have a carriage—she would certainly have servants—she would certainly not do a stroke of work herself. She would be a grand lady—she would go about with Miss Dal——; no, she hardly thought she should care to see very much of Miss Dalmeny. And what did Mr. Dunlop mean by asking her whether Miss Dalmeny had prepared her for the proposal? Then she knew all about it, and not one word of kindness from her the night before, when Mr. Exton gave her the golden apple. She was good enough to marry Mr. Dunlop, but not good enough to be spoken to by Miss Dalmeny. Very well, then, some day—and here she began to dream of impossible revenge, a safety-valve for small natures. She could not understand it. What would her father say? What would her mother say? What would Harry say? What would all the world say?

Then, for a brief space, imaginary Rapture, Joy, Triumph, while the wedding bells rang, and outside the church the coach-and-four waited, the gallant steeds tossing impatient necks, and the tag-rag—including the bold-faced gipsy thing, the blacksmith's daughter, who dared contest the golden apple with her—stood and watched and envied.

Then, for a longer space, a sinking and sadness of heart. What would Harry say? She had attracted, during her brief span of nineteen years, as many suitors as, in that short period, a maiden may. Young gentlemen who knew her had not disdained to pay her those attentions which please them and hurt nobody. There had been farmers' sons—in fact, there were still farmers' sons, because no one was ever dismissed. But for a permanency, there was Harry.

He was a gamekeeper. One of Mr. Dunlop's gamekeepers. Would he still continue, Alma wondered, to game-keep for the Squire when she was married to him? He was a tall, stalwart, handsome young fellow of two and twenty, and he loved the girl with a passion which she could neither understand nor return. What maiden of Alma Bostock's nature can return the passion of a man who loves her? As well ask the shallow rippling lake to reflect in all its strength and glory the splendour of the sun. He believed in her love as an honest man should. His blood would have boiled had he known of these passages to which we have been constrained, sorrowfully, to allude, with Tom Caledon, Mr. Exton, and others. Of them he knew nothing. To him the girl was a pearl among maidens, full of sweet and lofty thoughts, too high for him, who was one of nature's own gentlemen, and as incapable of a meanness as any peer of noble lineage. He made her his idol, his goddess. He saved and economised for her, paring down tobacco to the lowest point compatible with a pipe a day, cutting off beer, and living at the lowest, so that he might save money to buy furniture and make his Alma comfortable. He would have liked nothing better than to wrap her in swan's-down and leave her no work to do but to sit warm and comfortable while he worked for her. And all this Alma knew.

That was the gamekeeper's idea of love and marriage: the wife was to be cosseted up and cared for by others. She was to sit warm and comfortable while her husband did what the Americans call the "chores." Her place was to look happy while she was petted and made much of. Well, that is a kind of duty, Alma thought, which most girls find to come pretty easy.

On the other hand, the Squire's idea about wedlock seemed to be that his wife was to do great quantities of work—perhaps the washing and the mangling. No doubt he must be cracked. Still, he had the good sense, Alma thought, to come to the prettiest girl in all the country-side. Also, though she was young and artless, the thought did occur to her that when once they were married, marriage being a tie impossible to dissolve, the wife might fairly sit down and refuse to do anything, after which the Squire would have to keep her, as the Squire's wife ought to be kept, in idleness.

But what in the world would Harry say? He was a masterful man, and he was strong. Suppose he and the Squire were to fight about her. Such things had been. Alma's heart glowed within her, as she pictured such a battle as she had read about—all for her—she herself looking on from a safe distance. And yet Mr. Mill tries to persuade us that woman's influence has always made in the direction of peace.

Suddenly she became aware that it was half-past twelve o'clock. Simultaneously with the striking of the clock arrived her mother.

She was hot: she was a little out of temper: she was disappointed with her marketing.

"Alma!" she cried. "You here?"

In point of fact, Alma ought to have been in the kitchen, where the potatoes were still waiting to be washed and peeled, and all sorts of culinary operations were already overdue. And to find her daughter actually sitting down in the best room in the morning was revolutionary, simply.

"Yes, mother," she replied meekly; "I am here."

"And where are the currants?"

"I haven't picked them."

There was something peculiar about the tone of Alma's voice. Generally, she was extremely obedient, having been rendered so, like Shagpat, of immortal memory, by reason of thwacks. But to-day, without being exactly mutinous, she was calmly superior.

"I have not picked them," she said. A bare statement of the fact.

"Oh! and what in the world have you been doing, then?"

"Nothing."

Of all replies that Alma could have made, this was the most astounding. Had she been pert, which often happened; had she been saucy, which was not unusual; had she been rude, which happened both when she was pert and when she was saucy, an answer would have been found; but that she should calmly and without excuse state that she had done nothing, was beyond all Mrs. Bostock's experience of girls, and she had had a long and painful experience.

She gasped.

"And the potatoes?"

"I haven't touched them. I haven't been into the kitchen at all."

"And the cabbage?"

"I don't know nothing about the cabbage."

"And the beef?"

"I haven't touched the beef. I tell you I haven't been into the kitchen this morning since breakfast."

"Alma Bostock," said her mother calmly, but with despair, "are you mad?"

"No, mother."

"Has father been carrying on? Have you up and sauced your father, child?"

"No. I haven't seen father; and I don't want."

"Then what's the matter with the girl? Is she gone out of her senses with last night's tom-foolery?"

"No, mother. It isn't that."

Just then returned her father. He, too, was out of temper, because things had not gone altogether right in the matter of buying and selling that morning. It was nothing connected with Alan's interests. Quite the contrary. Only a *coup manqué* of his own, a little transaction in which plain honesty for once would have done better than chicanery.

"Now what's this?" he asked abruptly, seeing the elements of a domestic row.

"I don't know what ever in the world has come over Alma," said her mother. "Been sitting down, if you please—sitting down—here—here—all the morning, and done nothing! You'd better come back in an hour's time, father. There can't be no dinner till then. No potatoes peeled, no cabbage washed, and the beef not in the pot; and my young lady sitting on the sofa, as grand as you please, doing nothing."

Bailiff Bostock banged his riding-whip on the table so that the window-frames rattled and every individual keepsake on the table jumped into the air with alarm.

"Now, you—go up to your own room," he said. "Hanged if you were a couple of years younger if I wouldn't lay this whip over your shoulders. Get out of my sight, I say, lest I do it now."

Alma meekly obeyed. But as she mounted the stairs there was a twinkle in her eye and a dimple at the ends of her lips which showed the anticipation of a little game of table-turning, of quite a supernatural kind, in the immediate future. Her mother saw both twinkle and dimple, and returned to her kitchen deeply marvelling what manner of thing had happened unto her daughter.

CHAPTER XXI.

"Then a most astonishing thing happened."
VICTOR HUGO.

THE bailiff banged about the room like a bluebottle against a pane of glass, swearing at large. His wife, used to these illustrations of temper, went on peeling the potatoes.

"I can't think," she said quietly, "what ever can have come to Alma. Who ever heard tell of such a thing before?"

"I know what is going to come to her," replied Alma's father grimly, "if it ever happens again."

Then there was a pause, after which, observing that if dinner was not ready in half-an-hour, he would perpetrate mysterious horrors, the bailiff retreated.

Alma remained upstairs.

Presently her mother called her. There was no answer. Then she ran up and tried the door, which was locked and bolted.

"Come down this minute, Alma."

"Shan't," the young lady replied.

"Come down before your father comes home. He won't take any more notice."

"Shan't," Alma replied again.

"Come, child. Don't make your father mad."

"Father," she said, "may get as mad as he likes. I mean to stay here till he comes upstairs and begs my pardon."

"Then, my lady," said Mrs. Bostock, "you'll have to stay pretty long." There was no reply, and Mrs. Bostock returned to her potatoes.

The bailiff walked down his garden in angry mood. From the garden-gate, looking down the road, you could see the beginning of the village. He leaned over the rail and looked up and down.

Things were not going so well as, with his opportunities, he had a right to expect. Two hundred and fifty pounds a year, *and* the buying and the selling, meant other possibilities. There was, for instance, a little commission on which he had fully calculated. The other party, to the ineffable disgrace of humanity, had that very morning disclaimed the transaction, and refused to part with the ten per cent. This disgusted the bailiff, and predisposed him for wrath. Alma's strange forgetfulness was, therefore, like a spark to a mine. After exploding he left the house, and leaning over his garden-gate, brooded as a deeply-injured man for a few minutes, and then, half mechanically, opened the gate and strolled along the road in the direction of the village.

It was a bright and beautiful day in July, the sun lying hot and strong upon the fields, turning the green corn into yellow, and doing all sorts of fancy painting with apples, pears, and peaches. The bailiff, who wanted a great deal more culture before he could get the right grip of nature's beauties, walked, growling to himself, with the intention, I believe, of taking a glass of beer, as a snack before dinner, at the Spotted Lion. But as he passed the Squire's cottage, he was hailed by the tenant.

"Come in, Bostock," cried Alan. "You are the very man I wanted to see."

The bailiff growled again, and swore melodiously between his teeth; but he obeyed the invitation.

Alan was writing, but he put aside his pen, and turned his chair from the table.

"Now, then," he said. "I was coming up to see you this afternoon, to say what I have to say." He rested his head on his hand, and his elbow on the arm of his chair, looking at the bailiff in his meditative way. Bostock thought he looked at him reproachfully, and began to wonder if anything had come out. It is always disagreeable to be afraid of something coming out. In the case of gentlemen like Mr. Bostock, too, there are so many things which one is anxious to keep in obscurity.

"Well, sir?" he said, feeling hot and uncomfortable.

"Pray take a chair, Bostock. We will leave the door open for coolness. First of all, about the farm."

"What about the farm?"

"Well: we are not doing well with it. You can see that by your own accounts. Can you recommend anything?"

The bailiff thought that accounts are things over which a Christian compiler may rejoice, inasmuch as they may tell a different tale to him who writes them and to him who reads. But he did not say so.

"I am disappointed, I confess, with the result. I hoped that there would be a margin of profit; but we are sinking deeper and deeper."

"Well, sir, you see there's all the charges you made on it at first: the machinery, and the rise of wage, and all. And then it is but a small farm. If you really want to make money—what a gentleman like you would call money—by farming, farm large. Get two or three of your farms, run 'em into one, and make me—there, now, that's the only way—make ME bailiff of the whole."

Alan allowed this suggestion to fall to the ground.

"You may strike one of your labourers off the roll, Bostock. I have decided that I have done all I can by my year's work upon the farm. If I have failed to make myself a friend of the men, which is, I am sorry to say, the case, I have learned what a rough and hard life they have, and how difficult it is to move in the direction of culture men whose days are spent in labour. That is something. Where I am most disappointed is that I cannot get any nearer to them."

"You're quite near enough," said the bailiff.

"The men shun me: they will not work with me if they can help it. Even with the boys I make no headway. They look upon me with some sort of dislike."

"That lot," said Mr. Bostock, by way of consolation, "would dislike the Devil himself."

"Well, the end of it is that I withdraw from the field-work. There is plenty to do here: I have to arrange my amusements for the winter, get the Art Gallery in order, make another attempt at night-schools—plenty to do. But I am going to take a very serious step."

Mr. Bostock turned pale. Not going to dismiss the bailiff?

"In order to enter fully into the mind of the people, to sympathise with them, to understand my own failure up to the present point, and guard against more and greater failure, I must have a wife. She must be herself a daughter of the class, or near to the class, among whom my life is to be spent; and she must be ready to enter into my views, and help me in my work."

Mr. Bostock stared with all his eyes. What the deuce did all this mean?

"In so important a matter—because I cannot pretend to be actuated by the—the usual motives in seeking a wife—I took the advice of friends. They have pointed out to me the girl who seems to possess most of the requirements for the position. That girl is——"

"Not Black Bess, daughter of the blacksmith!" cried the bailiff, in alarm; for the blacksmith and he were not friends.

"No—not that young woman," Alan replied, with a smile. "In fact, Bostock, it is—your daughter."

"My gal? Mine?" This time he jumped out of his chair with excitement. For in a moment that crafty brain saw the boundless possibilities of the position. For himself, ease and comfort assured for life: no more necessity for paltry cheateries: the luxury of virtue attainable without an effort: and even if awkward things did come out, the certainty that they would be smoothed over.

"Yours, Bostock."

"My gal!" he repeated slowly. "Mine!"

He opened his lips and gasped. This was indeed a Providential go.

"You are not joking, Mr. Dunlop?"

"You ought to know by this time, Bostock, that I am not in the habit of joking."

This was quite true. No one ever knew Alan Dunlop make a joke. He would as soon have stood upon his head.

"I have already spoken to Alma about it—in fact, I spoke to her this morning. She has consented to become my wife on the terms I propose, to join in my work among the village people, and raise them, with herself, to the higher levels."

"Oh!" Bostock became more and more bewildered. The young lady whom he threatened with his horsewhip half-an-hour before was already, then, the betrothed of Squire Dunlop. "Oh! You have spoken to my gal," he added, slowly, "and my gal has consented. Ha!"

"I hope you have no objection, Bostock."

"Well, sir," he replied with dignity, "I don't see any objection, if Alma's willing. That gal was born to raise herself—we see it in her from the beginning. And she has a feeling 'art. Like her father, she has a feeling 'art."

"Very well, Bostock. I will go over and see her again to-morrow morning."

"What will Lord Alwyne say, sir?"

"My father never interferes with my scheme of life," said Alan.

He nodded his head and returned to his writing, as if that interview was over.

Mr. Bostock hastened home with a very different air from that with which he had set out. And when he entered the kitchen, which was at the very moment when his wife was dishing the potatoes and setting-out the dinner, he came in whistling and singing, like unto a jocund swain of Arcady.

"Why, Stephen, what's come over you now?" His wife thought that he might have had some slight touch of sunstroke, or some sort of fever. But no; it was not sunstroke, nor fever. Joy, as we know, does not kill. "You whistling and singing! and Alma—— why, all the world's gone mad!"

"Where is my little gal?" he asked, with emphatic affection, rubbing his hands together. "Where is my little gal?"

"Where should she be, an idle hussy, but where you sent her —in her bedroom sulking?"

"Ah, we are but purblind mortals, wife." He filled and drank a glass of beer. "Only purblind mortals in the day of our wrath"—this was Scriptural—"and no man knoweth what a talk with the Squire may bring forth. My little gal is upstairs, in her bedroom, is she? Well, it's a warm day, and she'll be cool and comfortable there. Go and tell her to come down and kiss her daddy. You and me will peel the potatoes; she shall sit on the sofy in the best room and look pretty."

Was the man stark staring mad?

"My gal, Alma!" he sighed sentimentally. "Mind, wife, I always did say that gal would be a credit to us. And a feeling 'art."

"If you did say that, Stephen, you said it behind my back. Feeling heart? Yes, after a bit o' ribbon and a ruff. Alma won't come down, she says, unless you go upstairs and beg her pardon."

"At any other time," said her father, rising with alacrity, "at any other time but this, I'd see Alma d——d first, and break my stick over her shoulders afterwards. Now, my dear, it's my turn to sing small; very small we must both sing now."

"Why, what has happened, Stephen?"

Stephen did not reply, but climbed heavily upstairs.

"Alma," she heard him cry in honeyed tones. "Alma, my little girl, come out and kiss your daddy."

"Say 'I beg your pardon,'" cried Alma shrilly, from the safety of her own room.

Mrs. Bostock laughed with the incredulity of Sarai.

"I beg your pardon, Alma," said her father. "I beg your pardon, my little gal; come out and kiss your loving dad."

The door was instantly opened, and there was a sound as of a paternal embrace, and a kiss upon the forehead. And then they came downstairs together, the father with his arm round his girl's waist.

"Lord!" said Mr. Bostock, "if I'd only a-known it. But there, you see, you said nothing. That was your artfulness. Kiss me again, pretty."

"Now, Bostock," said his bewildered wife, "when you've done carrying on like a Tom-fool in a show, p'r'aps you'll sit down and eat your dinner."

"Dinner!" cried the bailiff, "what's dinner at such a moment? We ought to be drinking champagne wine. And we shall, too; only you wait. Alma, tell your mother all about it. No—I will. This gal o' mine,"—he laid his broad hand upon her head, and the triumph of the moment was to Alma almost as delightful as the triumph of the golden apple,—"this gal o' mine, who takes after her father for sweetness of disposition, is going to marry no less a nobleman than Mr. Dunlop—there!"

Tableau!

But Mrs. Bostock said, when she had recovered something of her tranquillity, that it seemed to her an unnatural thing, and one which, if brought to her late lady's knowledge, would make her turn in her grave. This aristocratic platform was the result of having been a lady's-maid. Both the bailiff and his daughter despised it.

How Mr. Bostock spent the afternoon in surveying the land, which he already regarded with the eye of a proprietor; how he saw himself, not bailiff of the smallest and least productive farm on the estate, but steward of half-a-dozen farms rolled into one; how he revelled in anticipations of large balances at the bank; how he puffed himself up with the sense of his newly-born greatness—these things belong to the chapters of Paralipomena. And if every novel had these chapters published in addition to its own, the world would not be wide enough to contain the literature of fiction. To the same chapter belong the flatness of the afternoon for Alma, and the mixture of pride and disgust which fell upon the soul of her mother.

In the evening, after sunset, the girl slipped out unobserved. Her father had just lit his pipe and her mother the lamp. One was sitting over needlework, the other over a book of accounts. It was quite usual for her to go out in the evening, and neither made any remark.

She slipped down the long garden-path as fast as her feet would carry her. At the garden-gate she looked up and down the road. Presently, a tall form came quietly along in the twilight. It was that of Harry, the gamekeeper. She opened the gate, and he came in, following her across the beds to the orchard at the side, where they could talk without fear of detection. This, in fact, was their trysting-place.

"I heard," said Harry, "about the fooling of the gold thing. Don't you turn your head with vanity, Alma. Not but you deserve it better than Black Bess, and if you like it, why—there —it don't matter to me."

He has got his arm round her waist, and is a tall young fellow, looking handsome and well-set-up in his rough gamekeeper's dress.

"No, and nothing will ever matter to you any more, Harry," said the girl.

"Why, what has happened, Alma?"

"Oh! Harry, you and me can't ever marry now."

"Why not? 'Cause of father? Who cares for your father?"

"No, not because of father—worse than that—'cause of the Squire, Mr. Dunlop."

"What's he got to do with you and me, Alma?"

"A good deal, Harry. He pays your wages, which is what he has to do with you. And he has asked me to marry him."

"You! Alma—you! To marry the Squire!"

Even the bailiff's astonishment was not greater than honest Harry Cardew's.

"You, Alma?"

"He will have it, Harry. I can't help myself. Besides, though I like you the best, and you know that very well, it *is* a grand thing to marry the Squire. And if I was to say 'no,' there's all the rest to pick and choose from. For he's determined, he says, to marry in the village, so as to get to understand—— there—I don't know."

Harry was staggered. He was prepared for almost any other kind of blow. That the bailiff would not consent he knew already; but Alma had promised, with every vow that the girl knew, fidelity to him. She would keep company with no one but him: how, then, about the walk through the woods with Mr. Exton? The young man trusted her, as is the way with loyal young men. And now she was asked in marriage by the Squire—of all men in the world. Did Rebekah, when the great sheikh's messengers bore her away, leave behind her some mourning swain of Padan-Aram?

"What did your father say?" asked Harry.

"Father's proud. Been kissing and hugging me all day long," Alma replied.

"What would your father say if you told him you liked me best?"

"Father 'ud beat me to a mash," said the girl with the straightforwardness of conviction.

"So he would—so he would. Bostock's handy with his stick, 'cept when a man's about. Well, you ain't married yet, my beauty. You go on easy and quiet. Don't you fret. When the right time comes, we'll see."

"Why, what would you do, Harry?"

"Never you mind, pretty. I've got your promise and the broken sixpence. Go on fooling round with the Squire a bit longer, if you like—let your father make what he can out of him while the sun lasts, for it won't last long. And when it comes to a wedding, it'll be Harry Cardew and Alma Bostock, not the Squire at all. So there, now."

There was an air of strength and certainty about her lover which was not unpleasing. And the way in which, putting his arms round her, and kissing her at odd intervals, he assumed that she belonged to him, was at once terrifying and delightful. It would never do to miss the chance of Weyland Court, for although Mr. Dunlop said something foolish about work in the village, that was nonsense, and she intended to live as the wife of the Squire ought to live, in idlesse at the Court. On the other hand there would be the dreadful trouble of a husband of whom she was afraid. Far better the man who held her in his arms, the handsome, stalwart Harry, as brave as a lion and as strong.

"So there, Alma, my gal," he said, "and now, good-night. I've got to think over it, somehow. If I must speak to Mr. Dunlop, I shall tell him everything. But I shall see. Keep up your courage, my dear."

He left her, and she returned to the house.

Her father was drinking brandy and water.

"Where have you been, Alma?" asked her mother.

"Into the garden for my basket," she replied, using a figure of speech common among young women, but not inculcated in any of the copybooks, called the *suppressio veri.* She had, in fact, brought back a basket.

"Your mother," said Mr. Bostock, "says it isn't natural. I suppose flesh and blood isn't natural next, nor a pretty girl isn't natural. To me, now, it only shows what a straight man Mr. Dunlop is. What a man! As I said the very first day when he made me his bailiff. 'He is a man,' I said, 'as knows a man when he sees a man.' First, he says to himself, 'I want a bailiff. Where shall I find that bailiff? Where am I to go for honesty and hard work? Stephen Bostock,' he says, 'is that man.' Next, he says, 'I want a wife—not a fal-lal fine lady, but a honest wife. Where shall I find that wife? Alma, daughter of Stephen Bostock, is the girl for me,' he says; 'my bailiff's gal. She takes after her father and has a feeling 'art.'"

He looked round the room triumphantly, after quoting this double illustration of his employer's remarkable acuteness.

"Going into the garden after your basket," he echoed, after a pause. "Next year you'll be sending your footman into the garden after your basket. See how different men are from women," he observed. "Mr. Dunlop wants a wife. He takes his bailiff's daughter. Now if I had a boy, do you think Miss Miranda would marry *him?*"

"I am quite sure," said his wife, "that she wouldn't be such a fool."

"No, she wouldn't. Gar! it's their cussed pride."

They left him alone presently, and he drank more brandy-and-water, considering how this new relationship could be turned to the best advantage. He saw many ways. As he considered each in its turn, his face assumed the varying expression of conceit, selfishness, cunning, and extraordinary satisfaction.

He sat up in his chair and slapped his leg, a resonant slap, which woke up Alma lying in the room above, and made Harry the gamekeeper, a mile off, think there was a shot in the preserves.

"It's fine!" he ejaculated. "Dammit—it's fine!"

CHAPTER XXII.

"They say, best men are moulded out of faults!"

So Alan Dunlop became engaged.

Events of great magnitude are seldom long before they meet with the trumpet of Fame. It need not be detailed how the intelligence was received at the Spotted Lion: how the thing, whispered at first from ear to ear, was speedily proclaimed upon the housetops: how, finally, the London papers got hold of it, and sent specials down to write sensation columns on the Weyland Experiment.

The members of the Order, for their part, received the news with unfeigned disgust. There could be no longer any doubt as to Hamlet's madness. A man may give up all that makes life desirable and go to work in a smock-frock, and yet not be mad. A man may fancy that he will be able to educate the British peasantry into a love for culture, and yet not be mad. Dubious and ill-defined as is the borderland between sanity and its opposite—multitudinous as are the men who cannot quite see things as other men see them—there can be no doubt as to which side he belongs who, being a gentleman, actually proposes to marry a village girl, without the pretence of passion, and solely in order to carry out an experiment. The opinions of the fraternity, variously expressed, amounted, therefore, to this, that Alan Dunlop must be mad. The spirit of the Order, which requires affection and service to be given by knight to demoiselle, and not to fillette or chambrière, was infringed. It was *lèse-majesté*—high treason against Love. And to the Sisters, though none expressed the feeling in words, it seemed a cruel slight towards their Abbess.

Naturally it was Miranda who first talked about it. The Sisters, or a good many of them, were collected in Desdemona's cell, which was, as we know, a great place of morning resort; chiefly because its occupant sat there over what she was pleased to call her work, which was chiefly the devising amusements for the Abbey, and because she never minded interruption.

"I have known," said Miranda in her quiet and straightforward manner, seeming to be aware of the thought that lay in every mind—"I have known for some time what has been in Alan Dunlop's mind; and it is a great unhappiness to me, because, of course, he has always been a great deal to me, a part of my life."

Desdemona, from the depths of her easy-chair, murmured lightly:

"Henceforth, let us acknowledge that Hamlet is really mad. To have been with Miranda all these years, and not to have fallen in love with her, is alone enough to prove it. Has he made love to any of you, my dears?"

No: there had been no sign of flirtation, no indication of the slightest tendency in that direction towards any of them. Their pretty heads shook with unanimous sadness—call it rather pity—that one so handsome and so admirable from every other point of view should be so cold.

"Confirmatory evidence," said Desdemona. "He has been insensible to the single beauty of Miranda when he was alone with her, and to the collective beauty of the Order. Oh! he is quite, quite mad. And yet we love our Hamlet."

"No," said Miranda, "Alan is not at all mad: he is only an enthusiast: he has chosen a path full of difficulties, and he does not always see his way plainly. I fear he has made a grave mistake."

Said Desdemona: "But he is not married yet." She said it with emphasis.

"Unfortunately," Miranda went on, "it was partly my fault. Alan asked me to recommend him the best—or the least objectionable—of the village girls. Of course I could not conscientiously recommend him any one really, but I undertook the task, in the hope that he would see the dreadful mistake he was going to make. And then, the other day, when Mr. Exton had his unfortunate 'Judgment of Paris,' just after he had awarded the prize to Alma Bostock, and at the very moment when she was standing before us all, looking her very best in the first flush of her triumph, Alan came in, and jumped at once to the conclusion that there was the girl I had selected for his wife."

"And now," said Cecilia, with a sigh, "I suppose we shall have to disperse ourselves. There is an end of the Abbey of Thelema. Where else can the Order find so glorious a home, and so splendid an organ?"

"Where else," sighed another, "shall we find so complete a theatre?"

"Where else," asked Nelly, "shall we find such a free and happy life?"

"And a Park like Weyland Park?"

"And gardens like those of Weyland Court?"

"And such an owner of all, such an Amphitryon," said Desdemona, "as Alan Dunlop. Hamlet, with all his fancies, is the best of all the Brothers. But, my children, go on enjoying youth and pleasure. The Abbey is not dissolved yet: the Seigneur of Weyland is not yet married."

"Desdemona," said Nelly, "you said that before: you mean something: you are raising false hopes. You prophesy what you wish. Wicked woman! Alan must keep his word of honour."

"I am a prophet," replied the actress, "by reason of my age and sex. You will all become prophets in time, especially if you learn the art of foretelling by your own sufferings, which Heaven forbid. I read the future—some futures—like a printed book. Alan will not be married to the Bostock girl. Are you all satisfied?"

"Not quite," said Nelly, the most superstitious of womankind. "Tell us more about him. Will he ever marry at all? Will he give up his crotchets? Will he settle down and be happy like the rest of the world?"

Desdemona shook her head.

"Do you not know," she said, "that the Oracle would never give more than one reply at a time."

"Then, tell me something about myself," said the girl.

"Look out of the window," replied the Pythoness, "and see your fate."

Nelly looked, and returned blushing.

"What have you seen, my child?"

"Tom Caledon lying on the grass; and he saw me, and waved his hand. And Mr. Exton was walking away into the Park."

"That is your fate, my dear."

All the other Sisters laughed, and Nelly asked no more questions.

Alan did not appear that night, nor for several nights, at dinner. When he did, his manner was constrained. No one congratulated him: no one asked him any questions. Only Desdemona sought to speak with him secretly.

"I think," she said, when she found an opportunity, "I think, for my part, that a man's happiness is the very first consideration in life."

This was a proposition which could not be allowed to pass unchallenged by a man who had deliberately thrown away his own chance of happiness.

"I know what you think, Alan," she went on. "That I am a selfish old woman. Perhaps I am. I see no good, for instance, in your self-sacrifice. You were born to set an example."

"And I do set an example, I think," he replied grimly.

"Yes: the awful example. It was foolish enough to fancy that these clods would begin to long for culture because you went to live among them. You see they do not. But it is far worse to imagine that they will be any the better for your marrying among them."

"It is my hope," said Alan, a little stiffly, "that they will. It seems to me the only chance of understanding them."

"If I wanted to understand farm-labourers," said Desdemona, "which I do not, I should get at their minds by comparison. You drink a glass of wine critically; they gulp beer greedily. You make dining one of the Fine Arts: they eat where and how they can. You think of other people beside yourself, of great questions and lofty things: they think of themselves and the soil. As you rise in the scale you shake off more and more of the animal. As you descend, you put on more and more."

But Alan shook his head.

"Then there is another thing," Desdemona went on with her pleading. "If you marry this girl with the view of using her insight and experience to help out your own, what does she marry you for?"

Really, Alan could not say why she was going to marry him. Now he came to face the question, he perceived suddenly that it might be on account of his great possessions.

"Is it for love, Alan?"

"No, I suppose not—at least, I have not pretended to any love on my part."

"Is it in the hope of furthering your projects?"

"It is on the understanding that my ideas are to be studied and furthered if possible."

"The lower you go," Desdemona went on, "the less do people care about efforts which are based on ideas. They can understand a pair of blankets or piece of beef. Charity to them means immediate help. What sympathy you expect to find in such a girl I cannot think."

He made no answer.

She went on relentlessly.

"Another thing, again. Alma Bostock does not belong to the rank of labourers."

"I see very little distance between a small tenant-farmer, who is now my bailiff, and one of his labourers."

"You do not," she replied, "but Alma does. She sees a great deal. Alan, before the eyes of all English girls of the lower ranks there floats for ever a vision of rapturous splendour. They dream that a prince, a beautiful youth with vast possessions, is coming to marry them, and that they will go away with him to bliss unspeakable. Too often, the prince does actually come, and makes love to them. And they do go away with him—but not to marriage or to bliss, poor things. Alma's eyes are dazzled. No use for you to protest that in marrying her you want her to be your Lieutenant, that you intend to live down in the village among the people. They are not her people; she has risen a little above them: she will rise to your level, if she can. She will have her eyes fixed upon Weyland Court. As you have made her your wife, you must make her a lady. And then you will bring to your old home, not the worthy successor of your mother, no queenly chatelaine like Miranda, no sweet and beautiful girl like Nelly, but a companion who is no companion, a woman miserable because she has got her ambition, and is not satisfied because she is out of her place——"

"Stop, Desdemona," said Alan. "I have pledged my word. All these things may be as you say. It will be my business to fight against them."

He left her, and presently struck gloomily across the Park, homewards. Ever since the day when he offered himself to the village maiden, he had been tormented by a doubt worse than that of Panurge. Said Panurge, "Shall I marry? Shall I marry not?" Said Alan, "I must marry. Have I been a fool, or have I not? And if I have, then what an amazing fool!"

For of these late days a vision of quite another kind had crossed his mind. It began with that touch of Alma's hand when it lay in his. She was to be his wife: her hand was there in token of her promised word. It was a soft hand, and small, although it did all sorts of household work; but Alan did not think of its softness. It was, somehow, the wrong hand. It was a hand which had no business with him or his. When he talked with her the same feeling came over him. He was talking to the wrong woman. His words fell into her mind like water poured into the vessels of the daughters of Danaus, because it passed away and made no impression. The wrong woman. And if so, who was the right woman? If so, how could there be any other woman to fill that place but Miranda?

When it was too late, when he had given his promise to another, he found what Miranda had always been to him—the only woman in the world.

"A man's own happiness the chief thing to look after," Desdemona had said. And his duty to set an example in the conduct of life. Was it, then, altogether a mistake? Was his self-imposed mission, his apostleship of culture, wholly a great mistake? Was he, instead of a martyr, only an ass?

I think it would be difficult for a preacher, an apostle, or a prophet to propose to one's self a more disquieting question. Suppose Brigham Young in his old age had been troubled with doubts: suppose the Pope were to have misgivings about Protestantism: suppose Mr. Spurgeon were to become convinced that the right thing was the Establishment: suppose Mr. Ruskin doubting whether he had not better tear up everything he has written since the "Stones of Venice": suppose Mohammed at the close of his career wondering whether he had not done infinite mischief: suppose the Archbishop of Canterbury becoming a Ritualist: suppose Mr. Gladstone beginning to stone the priests. Such a revolution was going on in poor Alan's brain. Was he a confessor for the faith, was he a young man who had generously sacrificed himself in the pursuit of a noble cause, or was he—alas!—was he only an ass?

The owls in the trees hooted at him as he passed across the silent Park. "To-whoo! to-whoo! What an ass you are! To-whoo!" The wind in his face whispered it in his ears as he passed: "Ass! ass! ass!" And a low voice in the distance murmured unceasingly as he went along: "He might have had Miranda—Ass!" He got back to his cottage—how grim and mean it looked, with its stone floor and its pine-wood table!—and found a letter from Alma.

"My dear frend"—(after all, it made very little matter whether she spelled properly or not. Philanthropy, marriage, harmony, mutual respect, are things beyond the power of bad spelling to touch)—"My dear frend,—I have read the book which you lent me quite through. I will give it back to you to-morrow. I think I should like a storey-book better, if you will find me one. Father sends his love.

"Your affecshunate
"Alma."

Well: he taught her to call him her friend: she *had* read the book—one of Ruskin's shorter works; it was natural that she should like a story-book better than an essay; and it was also pleasant that she should add, in her artless way, the love of her father. Stephen Bostock's love, and yet . . . . oh! the wrong hand, the wrong voice, the wrong woman.

He went to bed, and lay awake, thinking sadly of the future which stretched before him. He saw himself carrying a burden growing daily heavier. He saw the sweet eyes of Miranda resting upon him with sympathy, but they gradually sank out of sight and disappeared. And then he was left quite alone with his burden, which was a live woman, struggling and fighting with him, and crying to go to Weyland Court.

Desdemona, for her part, began to think that in her professional career she had assisted at the construction of many a good drama of which the plot did not promise to be half so good as this story of Alan and Miranda. She had suggested many an ingenious situation, striking tableau, and astonishing *dénoûment* which the author had carried out in the book, and she on the boards. Now she had a plot to work out, the issues of which concerned the happiness of two people at least, not counting Alma.

To prophesy is all very well; but suppose it depends upon the prophet to bring about the fulfilment? Then it becomes embarrassing. What move should she take? Presently a thought occurred to her. It was as yet quite in the rough, but it was worth following up. And she sent for Tom Caledon, because he knew everybody and their history.

"Now, Tom," she said, "I want to have a confidential talk with you. Sit down, be patient, and tell me the exact truth, or help me to find it."

"Is it anything about Nelly and me?" asked Tom guiltily.

"No, egotistical boy—always thinking of yourself—it is not. It is about a much more important couple—about Alan and Miranda."

"Why—Alan is engaged to Alma Bostock."

"Please do not interrupt. The sagacity of men, when they do sometimes attempt to understand things, is sometimes too dreadful. Listen, I want to know all about Alma Bostock."

"All about Alma Bostock," Tom repeated; "as if anybody could ever know all about a girl."

"Do not be cynical, Tom. Men may learn quite as much about girls as is good for them to know. Let women have their little secrets if they like. However, I want to find out as many of Miss Alma Bostock's as I can."

"That seems an extensive order."

"First, what do you know about her?"

"Well, it's a good many years since I have been knocking about this part of the country, and I know most of the people in it——"

"Dear me! cannot the man come to the point at once? Do you know Alma Bostock well?"

"Pretty well." Tom smiled. "Pretty well—I have spoken to her."

"Now tell me, Tom, what sort of a girl is she?"

"Comely," said Tom, "not to say alarmingly pretty. Alan has got one of the village beauties."

"Ah!" said Desdemona. "I suppose the other two are that black-haired young person whom we saw in the tent last week, and the statuesque-looking girl. Beauties of a kind: but, Tom, *do* you think it right—I ask you—to use the same word to describe Nelly Despard and Alma Bostock?"

"Never mind," said Tom, waiving the question. And indeed it must be owned that the masculine mind is far more catholic and comprehensive as regards beauty than the feminine. We need not be ostentatiously proud, however, of this superiority. "Never mind that," said Tom. "She is a pretty girl."

"Is she—I don't say a good girl—of course she is a good girl." Desdemona paused a moment, as if she would receive with resignation an assurance to the contrary effect. "Of course she is a good girl," she repeated with emphasis, as such assurance did not come. "But is she a girl with any self-respect or dignity?"

Tom tried to look serious, but broke down and allowed a little smile to play about the corners of his mouth.

"Then I am to suppose that she is not," Desdemona said sharply.

"Indeed, I said nothing of the kind."

"Some girls of that class," his examiner went on with great persistency, "allow young gentlemen to kiss them. At least, I have heard rumours to that effect."

Here Tom fairly burst into a laugh.

"Oh!" said Desdemona. "Then I suppose that you are one of those who have already kissed this village maiden. Now, don't beat about the bush, Tom, but tell me everything."

"You really must not ask everything. I appeal to your generosity, Desdemona."

"I have none when the interests of Alan Dunlop are at stake. Tell me all, Tom."

"Well, then, if you must know—— I wonder what Nelly would say——"

"Nelly shall not know."

"If you do meet a pretty girl in a shady lane, and you do take toll as you pass—an innocent toll that really does no harm to anybody——"

"A country girl is only a toy to amuse a gentleman," said

Desdemona a little bitterly. "Go on, Tom Caledon. Has this toll been often demanded and paid?"

"Pretty often, I dare say," he replied, with unblushing effrontery.

"I suppose whenever you met her. Shameful!"

"Well," said Tom, "if you come to that, Desdemona, I should like to know what you would have done if you had met her dancing along the way with her bright eyes and rosy cheeks, and her curls as gay as the flowers in June?"

"I should have boxed her ears," said the lady calmly. "I should certainly like to box her ears. A girl who lets one man kiss her will, of course, let a dozen. One understands that. But about herself—is she clever?"

"I should say no."

"Has she any education?"

"I should say none. Reads and writes. Reads love-stories and writes love-letters, no doubt, to Harry."

"What!" shrieked Desdemona. "Writes love-letters? To Harry?"

"She used to, I know, because Harry, who is as good a fellow as ever stepped, has often shown them to me. But, of course, she has left off now, and given Alan the benefit of all her thoughts."

"I see."

Desdemona relapsed into silence. She was turning things over in her mind. This revelation about Harry was just the thing she wanted.

Tom went rambling on:

"She is good about the house, I believe: makes butter, looks after the cheese, and the cream, and the eggs—all that sort of thing. I've been in her dairy when her father and mother were away on market-day. It was quite Arcadian, I assure you. Made a fellow feel like a shepherd."

"Thank you, Tom; you have told me quite enough," said Desdemona. "That is another remarkably stupid thing about men—that they never know when to stop when they do begin confessing. I suppose it comes of the amazing opinion they always have of their own importance. Do you know if she is fond of running about in the evening, or does she stay at home?"

"Why," said Tom, "of course she likes running about in the evening—they all do. She used to get out, on one excuse or the other, and meet Harry at the bottom of the garden every night. I dare say she stays at home now, and listens to Alan. I should like to see him, with his solemn blue eyes, preaching to poor little Alma about the great and glorious mission she has to fulfil, while old Bostock pretends to enjoy the talk, thinking how to make something more out of it for himself. Perhaps poor old Harry is crying his eyes out at the bottom of the garden. He's just the sort of man to take things of this sort seriously; and if you've got nothing more to ask me, Desdemona, I will go and find him out, and see how he *does* take it."

Tom rose and took his hat.

"One moment, Tom," said Desdemona: "who is he, this Harry?"

"Why, Cardew, one of Alan's gamekeepers, of course. Everybody calls him Harry, and there can't be two Harrys about the place."

"What sort of man is he?"

"A tall, handsome man, about my height, but better-looking, and stronger. Just the sort of fellow to catch a girl's fancy."

"Yes; and is she the girl to keep a fancy in her head when once she has got one?"

"That I can hardly say. You see, Desdemona, my acquaintance with Alma Bostock is limited to the—the—little trifles I have communicated to you. Need I express a hope that they will not be mentioned before certain ears polite? I mean that perhaps Nelly, not to say Miranda, might not think the better of me. Now you, I know, will forgive these little trespasses, the knowledge of which has been, so to speak, wrung from me by a pressure equal to wild horses."

"I shall not talk about them, Tom. Of course, it is of no use asking you to abstain in future from—taking toll?"

"On the contrary, as regards Alma," said Tom lightly, "all the use in the world; she belongs to Alan now."

"And before, she belonged to Harry the gamekeeper. Poor Harry!"

"Well, but Harry did not know; and what the eye does not see, the heart does not grieve for."

"Poor Harry!—again. But now, Tom, we come to the really serious part of the business. Do you like the idea of this marriage?"

"Like it! No! but I am not Alan's keeper."

"Then will you help me to prevent it?"

"I would help you if I could, Desdemona."

Tom became serious, and sat down again.

"Of course Alma is quite unworthy of him."

"We must look about us then, and invent something."

"Shall we take Nelly into confidence?"

"Tom, your weakness as regards that young lady is unworthy of you. The fewer in our confidence the better. You and I are the only two to begin with. Later on, perhaps, we may let gamekeeper Harry join us."

"Harry? Well, I leave it all to you. Only Nelly would have enjoyed it so much."

"Nelly is charming as she is pretty. But Nelly might enjoy it so much as to share her pleasure in the plan with somebody else. You must confine your confidence to me, if you please."

"Very well," said Tom, "though how you are going to manage things I cannot understand."

Desdemona rose from her chair, and began to walk about the room.

"I never thought you would understand," she replied, at one of the turns upon the stage.

She still preserved her stage manner—right to left, left to right—and swept her skirts behind her with a touch of the hand, as she turned in her old familiar stage style.

"You see—stand up, sir, before the footlights, and face the audience—we are now at the end of Act the First, and this is the situation. Alan Dunlop is engaged to Alma Bostock, being himself in love with Miranda."

"In love with Miranda? How do you know that?"

"Because I am a prophetess—before the audience—and when the curtain is down I am a dramatist. But it is true, Tom; and Miranda, though she will not confess it to herself, is in love with Alan. Your friend Harry is already engaged to this village maiden, who may be represented on the stage as artless and innocent. In real life she is vain, foolish and designing, and Harry would be well rid of her. The girl herself, afraid of her stalwart rustic, afraid of her greedy and grasping father, afraid of her gentleman suitor, does not know what to do. The curtain falls upon the situation. Even the critics, who have left off applauding since poor old John Oxenford retired, are pleased with the tableau which ends the First Act, and the people are mad for what follows."

"And what does follow?"

"That we must devise for ourselves—you and I."

"But I am not a dramatist, Desdemona. I don't believe I could write a play to save my life."

"You might, my dear Tom; but it would be a shocking bad one. All you have to do is to follow my instructions. It is a very strong comedy. The first act is, beyond everything, effective. It remains with us to improve upon it in the second and third. Up to the present I only half see my way to the second. And as to the third, all I see as yet is a wedding. There will be bells, but not for Alan and the village beauty; and a procession, but Alma will not occupy the leading place in it—at least, not the place she contemplates——"

"You are such a clever woman, Desdemona," said Tom, "that I should think you might construct another drama out of Nelly and me, and make it end, like the first, in a procession with bells in which that fellow Exton shall not occupy the position he apparently contemplates."

"The old-fashioned plan was the best, Tom. The lover ran away with the girl, and made it up with her father afterwards."

Tom sighed and withdrew.

Desdemona sat down and reflected.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"We look before and after,
And pine for what is not."

The keeper, young Harry Cardew, was spending a warm afternoon in the congenial gloom of his own cottage, where, with his chin in his hand, and his elbow on the arm of his chair, he meditated in great bitterness. The rich man with exceeding many flocks and herds had come and stolen the one thing which was his, the little ewe-lamb. And he did not see how he should be able to get her back out of the hands of the spoiler.

Harry Cardew lives in this cottage alone. It was his father's before him, and his grandfather's before that—for he comes of a race of keepers. There is a floor of brick : the low ceiling, black with smoke and age, is crossed with a square beam of oak : his gun stands beside him as if ready for immediate use—you may notice that the shoulder of his coat shows the rubbing of the gun : the furniture is like the ceiling for blackness, but it is strong and good. There are evidences everywhere of the keeper's trade : skins, dressed and prepared, of cats, foxes, squirrels, and even otters : there are feathers of birds : a box of handy tools : there is a new iron mole-trap : and if you look out of the open window you will see nailed against the wall of the kennel rows of slaughtered vermin and carrion—weasel, stoat, and polecat, kite and crow. Harry's dog, a sympathetic creature, albeit young and longing to be out in the fields, sits before him, watching his master with anxious eyes.

Presently the lovesick swain looked up as he heard a footstep and saw Mr. Caledon leaping over the little streamlet which ran twenty yards in front of his door.

Tom looked about, and presently poked his head into the door and peered round in the dark.

"You there, Harry?"

"Yes, Mr. Tom. Come in—I'm here."

Tom sat down in silence, and pulled out his cigar-case and began to smoke for company.

"You've heard the news, Harry?" he asked presently.

"Yes, Mr. Tom," the keeper replied with a sigh. "I've heard as much news as will do me for a long time."

Then there was silence again.

"We broke the sixpence together; see, Mr. Tom." He pulled out a black ribbon with the token suspended from it. "Here's my half, I wonder what she's done with hers."

"Have you seen her since Mr. Dunlop first spoke to her?"

"Yes; I seen her the very night he done it. She came out and met me. Well, you know, Mr. Tom, as a man will, I bounced; swore Mr. Dunlop should never marry her, nor no man but me should have her. But when I came away it was tairable hard on me. For bounce as I may, I can't see no way out of it."

Again Tom found the best course to be silence.

"For suppose," Harry continued—"suppose I was to up and tell the Squire everything. How would that be? Either he'd send Alma away in a rage for deceiving of him—which deceit it is—or he'd maybe half believe, and then it would be bad for her and worse for me ever after, because of that half belief."

"That seems true enough," said Tom.

"Besides, there's another thing. Alma, she's kept on with me secret for a year and more. Nobody guessed it; nobody suspected it. Do you think it would be fair on the gal to split upon her, and ruin her beautiful chances?"

"Well, no," said Tom. "From your point of view it would not; and that seems a gentleman's point of view. But you don't want the marriage to come off?"

"Of course I don't, sir."

"And you don't see your way to preventing it by telling the Squire? Certainly some one else ought to tell him. You are not the only one, Harry, who would like to see the thing stopped. Lord Alwyne is one, I am another, the ladies at the Court would all rejoice to see it broken off. We shall do what we can. Keep up a good heart."

"I know Mr. Dunlop," said Harry. "When his word is once passed, there he abides. No, sir, it's no good. He has said he would marry Alma, and he will—even if he knew that on the very first night of her engagement she came out to meet and kiss an old lover in the orchard; even if he were to find out her father in his tricks; even if he knew that all the village laughs at him and his carryings on for their good. Nothing would turn Mr. Alan from his word. Lord help you, Mr. Tom, I know him better than you. He's only a year younger than me. Many's the time we've been out in this wood looking for eggs—ah! little did we think then. Listen, Mr. Tom; I'll tell you what happened last night, because I must tell some one. I was down there coming up from the village under the trees, where the path leads from the Park. It was twelve o'clock. I'd got my gun. There was no one about, and I heard footsteps on the gravel. It was pretty dark under the trees, but light enough beyond, and I saw the Squire walking fast over the gravel. Presently he came under the trees, and then he sat down on a log, quite still, thinking. He was within a couple of yards of me, and the devil came into my head. One shot and Alma would be free. No one to see me, no one to suspect me; because my place last night was on t'other side in these preserves. One shot. Lord! it looked for a minute as if it was nothing—just nothing—to put the piece to your shoulder and pull the trigger."

Harry paused and wiped his brow.

"Lord forbid I should ever be so near murder again! And while I might have done it—while the fit was on me, like—Mr. Alan got up, and went on his way home."

Tom laid his hand on his shoulder kindly.

"Don't have any more whisperings with the devil, Harry. They are dangerous things. Thank God no mischief came of that colloquy. Tell me, Harry, do you think she was fond of you?"

"What do we know, Mr. Tom? They say they are fond of us, and we believe them. It is all we have to go upon. If they tell lies, we can't help ourselves. If they carry on with gentlemen, we don't know."

Tom blushed, thinking guiltily of that little innocent toll we know of.

"If they say one thing to our faces and another behind our backs, what can we do? She said she was fond of me. There! I don't think gals know what a man's fondness means. They like to be made much of; and if one man isn't there, another 'll do just as well. I don't blame 'em, poor things. They don't know no better, and they can't understand a man's feelings."

"Perhaps," said Tom bitterly, thinking how most likely Nelly at this very moment was accepting the attentions of Mr. Exton. "I believe you are quite right, Harry—they don't understand. You are not the only man who can't marry the girl he loves."

"I suppose not," said Harry. "Why, there's yourself, Mr Tom. Lord! I could never say a word about it to you before, but now it seems as if we were both in a boat together."

"Ay, Harry. I'm too poor, you know."

"What I shall do," said Harry, "is this. I shall wait on here till they're married; then I shall get out of the way. Alma lets me see her now, when it doesn't do much harm. But she's that hold upon me, Mr. Tom, that if she was to lift up her finger to me when she was a married woman I should run after, her whether it was to the orchard of the farm or the garden of the Court. And think what a scandal and a wickedness that would be."

"Yes," said Tom, "that would be throwing more fat in the fire with a vengeance. You *had* better get out of the place, Harry, if you can make up your mind to go. And if Nelly becomes Mrs. Exton, I believe I will go to America with you. We can smoke pipes together, and swear at things in company."

So they sat enjoying the luxury of gloom all the afternoon, till Harry, looking at his watch, said he must go see after his young birds, and Tom lounged slowly away through the fir plantations that bordered Weyland Park on the east, in which lay the keeper's solitary cottage.

He was gloomy enough about himself, for there could be no doubt now of Exton's intentions concerning Nelly. He haunted her: he followed her about: he seemed to claim some sort of possession of her which made Tom grind his teeth with rage. And he was sorry about his honest friend the keeper. He knew better than poor Harry what a shallow and frivolous young person this girl was on whom such a strength of affection and trust was lavished: he knew, too, what a dead failure her marriage with Alan would be, how utterly incapable she would prove of understanding or trying to understand the nobleness of his plans. So that in any case the outlook was dark. Just then, however, he was ready to view everything with foreboding eyes.

He told Desdemona something of Harry's trouble, and let out accidentally, because this intriguing dame pumped him as cleverly as a cross-examining counsel, that Alma had gone out to meet her lover on the very day of her engagement with Alan.

"The Second Act," said Desdemona, triumphant, "I consider to be as good as finished. And it ends well. However, there is the Third, which is always the most difficult."

CHAPTER XXIV.

"Elle aima mieux pour s'en faire conter
Prêter l'oreille aux fleurettes du diable
Que d'être femme et non pas coqueter."

AND it was then that the awful row occurred between Tom and Nelly which led to that Court of Love, the history of which has never till now been properly narrated.

It was in the morning, after breakfast; in fact, in the morning-room. No one was there but themselves.

"It makes me look ridiculous, Tom," she said, "to have you following me round with that doleful face."

"Whose fault is it if I am doleful?" he asked.

"Nobody's, except your own. You promised when I came that there should be no foolishness, and yet——" She stopped, with a look half of fun, half of vexation: "and yet, if I so much as go out for a ride with Mr. Exton—and he rides very well——"

"Learned to ride of an acrobat, I believe," said Tom.

"You think only acrobats can ride better than you. Oh, Tom! what a very conceited thing to say! I believe too," she added thoughtfully, "that it is unchristian. But it is not only riding. Whatever I do, if Mr. Exton is with me, you come too with your gloomy face, and spoil the sport."

"I dare say. I am not very jolly."

"The Sisters called you wrongly. They called you Brother Lancelot. It should have been Brother Killjoy. What harm does Mr. Exton do to you?"

"Every harm."

"Because he does his best to please me?"

"No: not that."

"Because he is a pleasant and amusing companion?"

"No; nor that."

"Then what, Tom?"

"As if you did not know, Nelly. Because it all means that he is ready to fall in love with you."

"Indeed, sir. Pray cannot a man——"

"Don't, Nell! What is sport to you is death to me!"

"I knew a Tom Caledon once," she said, picking a rose to pieces, "who did not grow sulky whenever I—chose—to—flirt a little with another man."

"And I knew a Nelly Despard once," he replied, "who when I asked her not to flirt with that other man, desisted, and kept her hand in by flirting with me. That was a great deal pleasanter, Nelly."

"So it was, Tom, I confess," she said, "much pleasanter for both of us; but then we were boy and girl."

"Two years ago."

"Now I am one and twenty and you are six and twenty, and we must think seriously about things."

"That means that Exton has got ten thousand a year."

"Mamma says so," said Nelly, demurely.

"Oh! mamma has been writing about him again, has she?"

"Do you actually suppose," asked the girl, with big eyes, "that mamma would let me stay here with no chaperon but Desdemona, without so much as finding out who was here? She knows *everybody*, and she has learned from some one how things are going on. I do not know who that some one is, but she is a true friend, Tom, to you as well as to me"

"How do you know that?"

"Because, Tom, mamma writes me as follows." She took out the letter and read a portion of it—"'braided with point-lace,'—no, that is not it—here it is—'And I am very glad, my dear child, truly glad to find that you have given up your foolish partiality for that penniless boy'—you, Tom—'and are now making good use of time which, though once wickedly thrown away upon an adventurer'—you, Tom—'may now be employed to the very best advantage. Mr. Exton, who is at the Abbey, and who, I rejoice to hear, quite appreciates my dear child, is said to have at least ten thousand a year. This may be exaggeration, but it points in the right direction. No doubt the other young man'—you, Tom—'has consoled himself with some other girl.' There, Tom, what do you think of that?"

Tom laughed.

"But it is barren comfort, Nelly," he said. "You soothe me and stroke me down, and then you go off to carry on with Exton."

"'Go off to carry on,'" she repeated. "What very remarkable English! Do you think the old Tom would have said such a thing?"

"Perhaps not, Nelly. The old Tom was a fool. He thought that when a girl said she loved him——"

"It was on Ryde Pier; it was ten o'clock and a moonlight night, and the band was playing; and the waters were smooth, and there were the lights on the yachts—and—and it was a new thing; and it was an unfair advantage to take."

"But you meant it then, Nell?"

She could not help it: she had that way with her. She lifted her soft heavy eyes, and met his.

"Yes, Tom, I meant it."

"And you mean it still?" he caught her hand. "Oh! Nelly, say you mean it still."

"I can't say it; not as you mean it, Tom, for oh! I am so much—so very much wiser. Two years ago I was only nineteen. I had been out for four or five months. I believed that mutton and beef grew on trees, I think. I had some lingering notion, though mamma did her best to eradicate it, that every well-dressed, handsome, pleasant man—like you, Tom—had plenty of money. Ah me! what a pleasant dream! Why could it not last?" She paused and collected herself. "And then came along a pleasant man—you, Tom—and stole away my heart. When it was gone I found out that it was sheer robbery on your part, and not exchange, as it ought to have been——"

"Exchange! Could you not take mine for yours?"

"Ah! Tom, that is the masculine error. The true exchange is—for a girl's heart, or hand, which is generally the same thing—an establishment. And that you could not give me."

"I've said over and over again that if seven hundred a year——"

"No, Tom, it won't do. Mamma is quite right. For the first year, while the wedding presents are fresh, and the unpaid-for furniture new, no doubt we might get along. But, oh! the misery of being in perpetual debt."

"And so I am thrown over, and that fellow Exton, with a face crinkled like a savoy cabbage, is chosen instead."

"Not chosen, Tom. He chooses me, perhaps. I do not choose him. I take him; I say yes to him, when you know I would rather say yes to some one else."

"Go on, Nelly," he replied sullenly. "Drive me half mad by confessing one thing and doing another. Tell me plainly, do you love him?"

"Whom?"

"Why, Exton, of course."

"No—of course."

"And yet—what are girls made of?"

"Sugar and spice, Tom, and all that's nice. *Il faut vivre.* When mamma dies there will be next to nothing for this poor child; while mamma lives there is not too much. This young lady has been brought up in ideas of what is *comme il faut.* She likes riding, she likes amusements, she likes balls and dinners, garden-parties and dances. She would like, if she married, to see a steady prospect of making the most out of life. Now you can't make much, as a general rule, with seven hundred a year."

Tom groaned. He was bound to admit that you cannot. What thirty years ago would have been considered a fair younger son's portion, is now a miserable pittance, regarded from a matrimonial point of view. Tom was a younger son's only son, and seven hundred a year was considered in the family as a plentiful allowance for such a position.

"Could I have believed two years ago that Nelly would have been so worldly-minded?"

"Could I have believed two years ago that Tom would have been so Quixotic?"

After this double question there was silence—Tom walking backwards and forwards, Nelly sitting on a couch pulling flowers to pieces with an angry flush in her cheek. Woman-like, she was ready to give in and own that she was wrong; and woman-like, she could not forbear from the strife of words, the contest for the last word.

"You take his presents," said Tom, like an accusing angel.

"I have taken yours," replied Nelly; as much as to say that the two cases were equal.

"Yes; but you let me tell you that I loved you," Tom pleaded.

"What has that got to do with it? Perhaps Mr. Exton has told me the same thing."

"And you have listened? You let him make love to you after all that has passed between us?"

"Two years ago, Tom. And, as I said before, a moonlight evening on Ryde Pier in August is hardly the time for a young maiden of nineteen to make any violent resistance. And, do you know, I think you have hardly any right, have you, to object to what Mr. Exton says to me?"

As a matter of fact, Mr. Exton had not declared love to her at all, and it was a very strange thing, considering the opportunities he had, that he did not. Nelly, more than half afraid, expected some sort of declaration every day.

Right? Tom had no right. Nelly knew that this was her trump card, her dagger which stabbed Tom to the heart. He had no right!

"Poor Tom!" she said, timidly looking up at him. "Poor Tom! It is a shame to say such things."

"Say what you like," he cried. "Henceforth there is an end. Flirt, coquette as much as you please. Be all smiles to one man and honey-sweet to another, and mean nothing to either. That is the way of all womankind, I suppose. I've done with you, Miss Despard."

He hurried away with the step of desperation.

Nelly shook her head with a smile, and as she performed this act of incredulity, a tear dropped from her eyes upon her cheek, and glittered in the warm light.

And then the hated rival appeared—no other than Mr. Roger Exton himself.

"They are going to have a meeting of their Madrigal Union in the garden. Will you come? I met Tom Caledon going away in a hurry. Have you quarrelled?"

"I never quarrel with Tom," said Nelly proudly.

"He looked agitated. Poor Brother Lancelot! I felt for him. What, I thought, if she were to treat me in the same cruel fashion?"

She went with him to the garden, and he spread a cloth on the grass, and laid himself leisurely at her feet, just about a yard from them, in fact. He wore a straw hat and a complete suit of white, and looked absolutely cool.

"They've got iced-cup indoors somewhere," he said; "but I remembered that you like the garden in the morning, so I left the cup, and got the madrigal people to come here. What a perfectly charming old garden it is! Reminds me of a place I once saw in Nepaul. It wants half-an-hour to the meeting.

Half-an-hour to ourselves in this delicious atmosphere, with that mignonette bed within easy hail, Tom Caledon gone off in disgrace, and the opportunity of telling you, Nelly, what a perfectly charming girl you are."

That was all he told her. What an extraordinary thing that he did not propose!

Tom blundered in his flight upon Desdemona, who stopped him and made him give her his arm. He was furious, and she saw it, guessing the cause; but she let him alone, waiting till he should speak.

This was not until he reached her room, when he sat down, and ejaculated reproaches upon womankind in general.

"That means," said Desdemona, "that you have quarrelled with Nelly."

Tom declared that nothing, nothing in the world, would induce him ever to speak to Nelly again; that she was heartless and worldly; that she took presents from two men at the same time; and so on.

Desdemona heard him to the end.

"This seems to me," she said, "to come under one of the leading cases and precedents of the Assises d'Amour. I shall refer it to Miranda, and we will have a Court of Love."

CHAPTER XXV.

"The Shepherds and the Nymphs were seen
Pleading before the Cyprian Queen."

THE Court of Love was summoned by order of the Abbess.

As this, curiously enough, was the first of such Courts which had been held in England since the days of the lamented Queen Eleanour of Provence, Desdemona was extremely anxious that it should be held with as much external splendour as the resources of the Abbey would admit, and that its procedure should show no diminution in the knowledge, practices, and authority of the Golden Code. It might not, she said, become a leading case: there had been other causes tried at which points of more vital interest were at stake; but the case of Lancelot *v.* Rosalind would, she was sure, prove one of no small importance. And its externals, she promised, should be in every way worthy of the issue to be decided.

As no one except the plaintiff, the defendant, and Desdemona herself, knew the least in the world what this issue was: as most people, outside the Abbey at least, regarded the impending trial as a sort of amateur breach of promise case, and wondered how Nelly Despard or any other girl *could*—a most meaning phrase, full of all insinuation, accusation, envy, and jealousy: and as it was rapidly spread abroad that the preparations were on a scale of unusual magnificence: as no one was old enough to remember the Courts of Queen Eleanour: as even in the Abbey the performers had very little idea what the show would be like—there was great, even extraordinary excitement over the impending Court.

It was called for five o'clock in the afternoon, and was to be held in the ancient garden of the Abbey, which, as has already been stated, consisted of an oblong lawn, planted with roses and flower-beds, and surrounded on all sides by two terraces. It was also protected from north and east winds by a high and extremely thick hedge, lying open to the more genial influences of south and west. There was no great elm in the garden, beneath which, as was *de rigueur* in the old *gieux sous l'orme*, the *grandes dames de par le monde* might shelter themselves, while they heard the pleadings, from the scorching sun of July; but there was over the northern end a great walnut, as stately as any of those which adorn the shaven lawns of Cambridge. In front of the walnut stood a fountain, and beyond the fountain was the old sun-dial. The garden itself was kept apart for the Court, but on the terraces a long awning had been rigged up, under which were ranged rows of chairs for the spectators, because in the Abbey of Thelema there was nothing done which was not open to all the world. No hiding of lights behind bushels in that monastery, if you please. So far it is very, very unlike the cages of the Ile Sonnante, the birds in which, as the good *curé* of Meudon tells us, began life by being mourners at funerals. If the doings of Sister Rosalind, or any other Sister, were to be dragged into the open light of a Court of Law, that Sister would like the Court to be as numerously attended as possible. On this ground the fair defendant had no cause for complaint. As regards the ceremonies, they were unreservedly entrusted to the care of Desdemona; the Brethren who were to take part were content with learning each his own *rôle* and place, and to leave the rest to their stage manager. There was not even a dress rehearsal: there was not even a full undress rehearsal: there were only a few interviews between the dictatress and her company. She had the working up of all the details: she had to contrive the costumes, the properties, the tableaux, and the grouping. This, indeed, was her great delight. She drew little pictures of her Court while yet it had no existence outside her brain; she sat in the quaint old garden and peopled it with the puppets of her imagination: when everything and everybody had their proper place on the lawn and she had drawn her plan of the whole, she began by instructing the servants and ushers of the Court; then she took the boys, who helped in the choir and acted as pages for the Functions, into the garden, and with the aid of a few chairs taught them exactly where they were to stand, and how they were to pose: then she drew up a plan of the action of her piece, with full stage directions for everybody; and had this copied, recopied, and corrected till she was perfectly satisfied. Then she distributed the parts. And then she sat down and heaved a great sigh and thanked the fates that an excellent piece was set afoot.

The principal part of a play may seem to an outsider to be the words. Not at all: the actor knows very well that the words are only introduced to set off the situations; and that many most excellent plays, especially those written for the Mediæval stage, consisted of nothing but situations when they left the dramatist's hand, the words being left entirely to the mother-wit of the players. In fact, they were all "gag;" and, as everybody knows, the situation is the only difficult thing to find.

"You have to plead your cause in person," Desdemona said to Tom Caledon, concluding her instructions. "Very well: plead it eloquently. On your pleading as you open the case will greatly depend the success of the piece—of course, I mean the success of your cause."

"Desdemona, I am too stupid. I *can't* write a speech. You must write it for me," said Tom. "And it seems such a shame accusing Nelly."

Sister Rosalind's advocate was Brother Peregrine. He asked for no help except access to the ancient constitutions and code of Love, which Desdemona readily gave him.

As for the costumes, they were, out of respect to the memory of Queen Eleanour, deceased, those of the twelfth century, and were designed by Desdemona in consultation with certain experienced persons, lent by Mr. Hollingshead, from the Gaiety Theatre. Those of the ladies were made out of what appeared to them the best imitation possible of the favourite materials of the period, which, as everybody knows, were samite, siglaton, and sandal. A full description of the dresses appeared in the *Queen* the following week. It was written by a lady for ladies, and those who wish for precise details may refer to that paper. Speaking from a masculine, but not, it is hoped, an unobservant point of view, I should say in general terms that the dresses fitted tightly to the figure, after the present graceful fashion, but were not drawn in at the feet, so as to make the wearers appear unable to walk with freedom. The hair was worn in long and flowing tresses or else gathered up in a net, but not the ugly net which we remember to have seen in youth and sometimes yet see on ladies of a certain rank of life, those who dwell around the New Cut, Leather Lane, or the High Street, Whitechapel. On the head was worn a square coronet of gold, and the Sisters were wrapped in crimson mantles, falling over the soft grey dress beneath. Their shoes were long and pointed, looped up with chains, and with low heels: their gloves were gauntlets, with any number of buttons, were grey like the dresses, and covered more than half the arm.

As for the men, the colours of their tunics were more various, because each chose what liked him best; they, too, wore long mantles or cloaks, which had capuchons; they carried daggers in their belts, and their shoes, like those of the Sisters, were long, with points looped up to the knee. They wore no swords, things which six hundred years ago belonged to the heavy armour, and were only put on for outdoor use. Within doors, if you wanted to stick anything into a friend over a bottle, or a game of chess, the dagger was much handier.

As regards both Brothers and Sisters, they were so practised in *bals masqués*, theatricals, and frivolities of such kinds, that they had arrived at the singular and enviable power of moving about in any costume with the air of belonging to it. It was acting without effort.

An hour before five all the chairs on the terraces were occupied. There was a party from the Vicarage; a few men brought down from town by Lord Alwyne; a party from the city of Athelston, and people from the country houses round, who all came by invitation. And about half-past four the Thelemites began one by one to drop in, till the garden space in the centre was crowded with them, with the ushers, the servants of the Court, and the page-boys.

"I should like," said Lucy Corrington to Lord Alwyne, "to have lived in the twelfth century."

He shook his head.

"Best enjoy the present, Lucy. It would have been all over six hundred years ago—think of that!"

It was, however, a very pretty and novel spectacle. Beneath the umbrageous foliage of the walnut-tree stood the Throne, a canopied seat on a platform, covered with crimson velvet. Chairs, also crimson covered, stood at either side of the Throne on the platform, for the Sisters who were to act as jury or assessors. The Sisters themselves were among the Brothers in what may be called the body of the Court. Below the Throne was the table of the Clerk to the Court, Sister Desdemona, and in front of her table two stools for the Assistant-Clerks. A table, covered with parchments, great inkstands and quill pens, was placed between the fountain and the throne; and at the right hand and the left stood two small desks or pulpits for the counsel in the case, while the fair defendant was to be placed in a low chair of red velvet beside her advocate. All the Abbey servants were there, dressed for the part—both those who regularly performed in the festivals and others, of whom it was suspected that Desdemona imported them for the occasion as trained supers. The band was at the lower end of the garden discoursing sweet music, and with them stood, or lounged, the boys, whom Desdemona had attired daintily in tight tunics. They were so well trained that they could look at each other without grinning, and could stand or lie about upon the grass in perfect unconsciousness that they were not assisting, in the heart of the twelfth century, at a serious and solemn trial before the High Court of Love. And the fountain sparkled in the sunshine; and the summer air was heavy with the perfume of flowers; and the Brethren were young; and the Sisters fair.

Not all the members of the Order were there. Brothers Lancelot and Peregrine; Sisters Miranda, Desdemona, and Rosalind were absent; that was natural, as they were the principal actors in the case to be tried. Also, Alan Dunlop was absent. He, poor man, was engaged in the village, giving his usual afternoon lesson in social economy to Alma Bostock. While he talked, she, who would much rather have been milking the cows, or making the butter, or gathering ripe gooseberries, or stealing a surreptitious talk with Harry, or even granting an interview to Tom Caledon, listened with lack-lustre eye and lips that ever and anon drooped with the semblance of a yawn, to a cascade of words which had no meaning, not the shadow of a meaning, to her. They had, however, to be endured to gratify this extraordinary lover, who, somehow, seemed to take pleasure in pouring them out. And while the girl's thoughts wandered away from the discourse, it must be owned that her *fiancée* himself was thinking how very, very much pleasanter it would have been to spend the day assisting at the Court of Love.

Another Brother of the Order was absent. It was Mr. Paul Rondelet. He said, on being invited by Desdemona, that he should have liked much to take his part, but that it had already been decided by the greatest German authority that there never were such things as Courts of Love; that all the contemporary poets and painters were in a league to mystify people and to make a pretence for posterity about a code of laws which did not exist; and that—here he laid his head plaintively on one side—he *must* consider the Common Room of Lothian and his own reputation. There might be Oxford men present. It is a special mark of the great and illustrious school of Prigs, that, in virtue of being so much in advance of other people, they always know exactly how much has been discovered and decided in history, literature, and art. For them the *dernier mot* has always been said, and generally by one whom the Prigs have consented to honour. So Mr. Rondelet remained aloóf, and stayed at home in the Abbey, shaping a new poem, in which a young man—it might have been himself—laments his exceeding great wisdom, which shuts him out from love, friendship, and the ordinary ambitions of life, deprives him of the consolations of religion, and leaves him alone, save perhaps for the Common Room of Lothian. He sent this poem to his friends, and they still carry it about with them, for it is as yet unpublished, cuddled up tight to their hearts. The show proceeded in spite of these two absent Brothers.

At a quarter to five the band stopped playing, and shut their books. Then there was a little movement, and a rustle, and an expectant whisper. Only fifteen minutes to wait. And it seemed quite natural and in keeping with the character of the piece when Sister Cecilia, taking a zither, as good a substitute for a lute as can be devised, sang, sitting on the grass-bank, while the long branches of the walnut made a greenery above her head, the "Ballad of Blinded Love":

"Love goes singing along the way:
  'Men have blinded and covered my eyes;
I have no night and I have no day,
  Dark is the road and black the skies.'
  Then Love laughs and fleers as he flies:
'See the maidens who've looked on me,
  Sitting in sorrow with tears and sighs:
Better have let Love's eyes go free.'

"Still, he has ears: and where the gay
  Songs and laughter of girls arise
(Music as sweet as flowers in May)
  Straight to their hearts Love's arrow flies;
  Then the music of laughter dies:
Farewell song and innocent glee.
  'Not my fault,' the archer cries,
'Better have let Love's eyes go free.'

"Not Love's fault: and who shall say,
  Could we but leave him his pretty eyes,
Whom he would spare of the maidens gay,
  Whom he would leave in the girlish guise?
  Yet 'twere pity should beauty's sighs
Cause her flowers ungathered be:
  With silken bandage cover his eyes,
Never let *that* boy's sight go free.

ENVOI.

"Prince, the shaft of his arrow flies
  Straight to the heart of her and thee.
Take no pity, although he cries,
  'Better have let Love's eyes go free.'"

Hardly had she finished the last bars of the ballad, when five struck from the Abbey clock, and, at the moment, the trumpets blared a note of warning, and every one sprang to his feet. "Oyez, oyez!" cried the usher; "silence for the Court."

First came the javelin-men, armed with long pikes and dressed in leathern jerkins, with straw round their legs instead of stockings. Desdemona afterwards prided herself on her fidelity in the detail of the straw, but Miranda thought it looked untidy. After the javelin men came the clerks and people of the long robe, bearing papers. These wore the square cap of office, and the black gown with full sleeves. After the lawyers came, similarly attired in black, Tom Caledon, the Brother who was to act as plaintiff. Two clerks came after him, bearing the *pièces de conviction* on a cushion—gloves, flowers, ribbons, and perfume. And then, leading *la belle accusée* by the hand, came Brother Peregrine, also disguised as an advocate. He had assumed an air of the greatest sympathy, as if so much unmerited misfortune called forth the tenderest pity; he seemed to watch every step of his client, and to be ready at any moment to catch her in his arms if she should faint away. Nelly, who thus came to answer the charge of *lèse-majesté* against Love, was wrapped from head to foot in a long cloak of grey silk, the hood of which fell over her face, so that nothing was visible save when, now and again, she half lifted it to snatch a hasty glance at the Court and perhaps to see what people thought of the effect. That, indeed, produced by her grey robe, her drooping head, and her slender graceful figure, was entirely one of innocence wrongfully defamed, and conscious of virtue. After the accused came the secretaries of the Court, and these were followed by Desdemona, who wore, for the occasion, such an expression as she had once imparted in her youthful and lovely days to the advocate Portia, and such a robe as the one which had in that representation enwrapped her charms. She was the Clerk of the Court. Lastly, her train borne by two pages, and led by Brother Bayard, the most courtly of the Brethren, came Miranda herself, supreme Judge and President of the Court of Love. She mounted the platform, and then, standing erect and statuesque, her clear and noble features touched with the soft reflection from the crimson canopy, and her tall figure standing out against the setting of greenery behind her, like Diana among her maidens, she looked round for a moment, smiled, and took her seat.

All were now in their places. In the chairs round the Throne sat the Sisters expectant; at their feet lay the page-boys, who were the messengers of the Court; at the tables sat the clerks, secretaries, and the lawyers, turning over the pages of the great volumes bound in vellum, and making industrious notes. Sister Rosalind, the defendant, was in her place, beside her counsel; and Brother Lancelot, who wore, to tell the truth, a shamefaced and even a downcast look, as if he was in a false position and felt it, was at his desk opposite her.

When the Court was seated, there was another blare of trumpets, and the usher cried again, "Oyez, oyez! silence for the Court."

Then Desdemona rose solemnly, a parchment in her hand.

"Let the defendant stand," ordered the Judge.

Brother Peregrine, in a mere ecstasy of sympathy, offered his hand to the victim; at sight of which Tom forgot that he was plaintiff, and rushed from his post too to offer assistance. The Court, except Desdemona, who thought this very irregular, and Miranda, who would not lower the dignity of her position by so much as a smile, laughed aloud at this accident. But Sister Rosalind, pulling her hood lower over her face, took the hand of her own counsel without the least recognition of the plaintiff's proffered aid. And Tom retreated to his place in confusion.

Desdemona read the charge.

"Sister Rosalind," she began in deep and sonorous tones, and with that clear accent which only long practice on the stage seems able to give—"Sister Rosalind, you stand before the Lady Miranda, President of this most venerable Court of Love, charged by the honourable and worthy Brother Lancelot, Monk of the Order of Thelema, with having wantonly, maliciously, wilfully, and perversely infringed the code of laws which governs the hearts of the young and the courteous, in that you have both openly and secretly, before the eyes of the Brothers and Sisters, or in the retreat of garden or conservatory, accepted and received those presents, tokens of affection and attentions, both those ordinary—such as every knight, damoiseau, and Brother of Thelema is bound to bestow upon every damoiselle and Sister of the Order—and those extraordinary, such as with loyal suit, service and devotion, one alone should render unto one. Do you, Sister Rosalind, plead guilty to this charge, or not guilty?"

Sister Rosalind, for answer, threw back her hood, and stood bareheaded before them all. With her soft eyes, which lifted for a moment to look round upon the Court and the audience on the terrace, her fair and delicate cheek and the half-parted lips which seemed as if they could plead more eloquently than any advocate, she carried away the sympathies of all. Phryne obtained a verdict by her beauty, without a word. So Sister Rosalind, by the mere unveiling of her face, would at once, but for the stern exigencies of the law, have been unanimously acquitted. There was a murmur of admiration from the audience on the terrace, and then, Lord Alwyne leading the way, a rapturous burst of applause, which was instantly checked by the Court, who threatened to hear the case with closed doors, so to speak, on the repetition of such unseemly interruption.

"My client," said Peregrine, "my calumniated client," here his voice broke down as if with a sob, "pleads not guilty, according to the Code of Love. And she desires also to set up a counter charge against the plaintiff in the case, Brother Lancelot, in that, being attached to her and an aspirant for her favours, he has shown himself of late days of melancholy and morose disposition, and while he was formerly gay, cheerful, and of a light heart, so that it was pleasant to accept his suit and service, he has now become sad and desponding, an offence contrary to all known and recognised *devoirs* of a lover. And she begs that the two charges may be tried together."

This startling charge, accompanied as it was by a reproachful look from the defendant, disconcerted Brother Lancelot exceedingly, insomuch that his eyes remained staring wide open, and his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth. The Court smiled, and Sister Desdemona, recognising in this stroke a touch of real genius, nodded approvingly to Brother Peregrine.

Then Miranda spoke.

"It is within my learned brother's right," she said, "to set up a counter-charge, and the Court will not fail to insist upon giving the charge full weight. Meantime, we will proceed with the original case as it stands set forth upon the roll. Brother Lancelot, you will call your witnesses."

But the counsel for the defence again sprang to his feet.

"I am instructed by my client—my most deeply injured client—to admit the truth of the facts alleged. She *has* accepted the presents and the service of more than one Brother of this illustrious Order. My Lady and Sisters-assistant, we admit, not as a fault, but rather as a virtue, that the facts are such as my learned Brother Lancelot has alleged in his plaint. I myself, my Lady, if for one moment I may be allowed to forget—no, not to forget my most needlessly persecuted client, which would be impossible—but to associate my poor personality with this admission, own before you all that I myself, humble as I stand, have been allowed to offer a faint tribute to this incomparable shrine of beauty and of grace. She has worn flowers in her hair which these unworthy fingers have gathered in this garden of Thelema and in its conservatories; she has honoured me and conferred a new beauty on those flowers by wearing them in her hair; she has accepted gloves of me, gloves——" here the speaker clasped his hands and gazed heavenward, "gloves—sixes—and honoured the giver by wearing these sixes—small sixes—at our dances. My client has nothing to conceal, nothing that need not be told openly. We may, therefore, my Lady and Sisters-assistant of this honourable Court, enable my learned Brother to do without witnesses and to proceed at once with his vain and impotent attempt to substantiate his charge by appeal to ancient and prescriptive law."

Brother Peregrine sat down after this fling at his opponent.

Sister Rosalind pulled the hood lower over her face and resumed her seat.

There was a silence of great expectation when Brother Lancelot rose to his feet, and after fumbling among his papers began, in a voice of great trepidation and hesitancy, which gradually disappeared as he warmed to his work, his speech for the prosecution.

"My Lady and worshipful Sisters-assistant of this illustrious Court, it has been the laudable practice among all loyal followers of honourable Love to discuss among themselves whatever points of difficulty may arise in the relations of lovers to one another. Thus we find in the Reports, meagre as these documents are, of the *jeux partis* lines of conduct laid down to meet almost every conceivable case, however knotty. These friendly discussions served to supplement and emphasise the Golden Code much as precedents in English law do grace, garnish, and sometimes obscure the mere letter of the law which lies behind them. Of such a nature was that famous discussion on the question whether, if a knight loves a lady, he ought rather to see her dead than married to another? Such, again, was the case argued before a noble company of knights, dames, and demoiselles, whether a certain knight was justified in accepting an offer made to him by a lady that she would belong wholly to him provided first she might be allowed a clear twelvemonth of flirtation. And such, to quote a third case, was the memorable inquiry into the reason why the old, and therefore the experienced, are generally neglected; while the young, and therefore the inexperienced, are preferred. Had the present case before the Court been of such a nature as to admit of its decision by a *jeu parti* or by formal committee of arbitration, I should have preferred that course. But that is not so, and I am therefore prepared, most unwillingly, to prove that a Sister of our Order, a Sister to whom my own devotion has been offered and freely given, has infringed the miraculous Code which has been, and will ever continue to be, the foundation of constitutional Love."

He paused, while one of his clerks handed him a prodigious roll of parchment.

"I now, my Lady, proceed to refer to the articles which I maintain to have been infringed by our Sister the defendant in this suit. I shall be happy to furnish my learned Brother"—Tom was plucking up his courage—"with a copy of these statutes and ordinances, so that he may correct me if I quote them wrongly, and at the same time lead him to reflect whether even at the last moment he may not feel it his duty to advise his fair client to throw herself upon the mercy of the Court."

Here Brother Peregrine sprang to his feet and bowed courteously.

"I thank my learned Brother. I need, however, no copy of the Code. It is implanted here."

He smote the place where he supposed his heart to be and sat down.

"I will then," continued the counsel for the prosecution, "I will at once refer the Court and the Ladies-assistant to the very third Law—of such vital importance did this great principle seem to the supernatural framers of the Code. In the very third Law we have it enunciated in the clearest terms '*Nemo duplici amore ligari potest.*' That is to say, no one, either knight or dame, damoiseau or damoiselle, can be bound by the chains of a twofold affection. The object of a lady's preference may perhaps be changed; one can imagine the case of a damoiselle after being attracted by supposed virtues in a new friend—reverting with pleasure to the proved and tried chevalier who has obeyed her behests, it may be, for years"—here there was a murmur of sympathy, every one present being perfectly acquainted with Tom's sad history.

Brother Peregrine looked round sharply, as much as to say, "Let no one be led astray by any feeling of sentiment. I will make mincemeat of him directly."

"This, I say, one can comprehend, and in such a case the devotion of the previously favoured lover would be declined with such courtesy as becomes a gentlewoman. But let this Court picture to themselves a case in which a lady shall look with equal favour on the prayers of one and the sighs of another, shall smile on one with the same kindness as on the other, and ask whether both in letter and in spirit the third article of the Code would not be flagrantly contravened? And such a case it is which my sense of duty now obliges me to bring before your attention. I am aware—that is, I can anticipate, that my learned Brother for the defence will attempt to rely upon the Thirty-first Article—*unam fœminam nihil prohibet à duobus amari*—nothing prevents the lady from having two lovers at once. No one, I am sure, would be surprised to hear that the Sister Rosalind had as many lovers as there are men who have seen her."

Here the defendant lifted up a corner of her veil and bestowed a smile upon the counsel. The audience laughed, and Desdemona was about to call attention to this breach of official etiquette, when Tom proceeded with his speech.

"That clause, I contend, has nothing to do with the charge

The facts, as the Court has been informed, are not denied, but admitted. My learned Brother has confessed——"

Here Brother Peregrine sprang to his feet.

"I cannot allow the word confessed to pass unchallenged. My Lady, I have confessed nothing. Confession implies guilt. Where there has been no sin there can be no confession. We accept statements, but we do not confess."

"Let us say, then," continued Tom, "that he has accepted my statements. He has, in fact, accepted the statement that Sister Rosalind received the service and the presents of two aspirants. He has informed the Court that he has himself offered gloves—small sixes—which were graciously received. I too have offered gloves—also small sixes. It has been my pride, as well as his, to see those sixes worn at our dances and in our drives and rides. I too have offered the flowers of Thelema to her who is to me the choicest and fairest flower in this our garden of all delights. My incense has been burnt at that shrine, my vows have been laid before that altar, as well as his. If my learned Brother accepts statements, he must accept them in their fulness: they are not to be glossed over, cleared away, or pared down to a mere nothing at all. The Court must give these facts their full significance. It amounts to this, that the defendant in this action has received with equal favour the pretensions of those who follow her with an equal—no, that cannot be—*not* an equal affection. No personal feeling of rancour or jealousy, no unworthy desire for notoriety, fame, or revenge, has prompted me in bringing about this important trial. It has been appointed by yourself, my Lady, acting on the counsels of the experienced Clerk of this Court. You will, with your Sisters-assistant, give the case a calm and impartial consideration; you will remember the dangers which lurk behind the infringement of these Laws; you will act so as to preserve intact the Republic of Thelema; you will give no encouragement to conduct which might implant in the midst of this happy retreat the seeds of jealousies, envies, and distractions, such as would make our Abbey no better than the outer world; you will prevent this generation of false hopes, this building up of delusive confidences, with the unhappiness of the final destruction of a faith built upon the sand. These things are not unreal. You will, my Lady, call upon your Sisters-assistant to ask their own hearts as well as the Code of Love. No Code, indeed, ever yet was invented which could meet the exigencies of every case. As regards the counter-charge, I confess I was not prepared for it. I may, perhaps, set an example to my learned Brother, by at once throwing myself upon the mercies of the Court. I confess, and do not deny, that there have been times when disappointment or grief at the conduct of my mistress has prevented the possibility of that cheerful demeanour and gaiety of heart which are the duty of every aspirant to Love. To this charge I plead guilty, and urge in extenuation the grievous provocation which I have received.

"Ladies of this most honourable Court"—the advocate raised his head, which he had dropped in shame during the last few sentences, and looked around with a proud and confident bearing—"I leave my case fearlessly in your hands, confident that justice will be done, and, although I am sure that it is unnecessary, I venture beforehand to recommend the defendant to your favourable merciful consideration. She is young, as you all know; she is beautiful, as you all know; she is charming, as you will all agree; she is gracious and winning, even among the gracious and winning ladies of this illustrious House of Thelema. On these grounds, ladies, and on these alone, I pray that her offence may be condoned, and that she escape with such an admonition as our Lady Abbess may think fit to bestow upon her."

Brother Lancelot, who acquitted himself at the end of his speech far better than at the beginning, sat down. There was just that touch of real personal feeling in his peroration which gave the trial, even for those among the spectators who had small sympathy with the Code of Love, a genuine interest. It was clear that poor Tom, who, indeed, never disguised the fact, was in real love with Nelly, whatever might be the feeling of the other man. There was a murmur among the people in the terrace which broke into loud applause.

"Si--lence!" cried the usher. "Silence in the Court."

Miranda here remarked that it was the second time this unseemly manifestation of feeling had been repressed; that if it occurred again, she should commit the whole of the visitors for contempt of Court, without the power of appeal. She reminded the offenders that such a sentence entailed their exclusion from the Abbey, and their confinement in the large prison of the outer world, among quite disagreeable and even vulgar people, until they should be purged of their contempt. A shudder, visible to the naked eye, ran through the crowded chairs at this dreadful threat.

Miranda then invited the counsel for the defence to say what he had to say.

Brother Peregrine rose immediately, and after pulling his gown well over his shoulders, adjusting his square cap, and clearing his throat, assumed a pose which was rather one of defiance than of appeal, and began his oration without notes of any kind, with a rapid volubility in strong contrast to the hesitation and difficulty with which his opponent began his speech. I am inclined to believe that Tom's speech was written for him by Desdemona, but that he altered and amended the close. On the other hand, Brother Peregrine's address was undoubtedly all his own. There was a cold glitter about it which held the attention, but it was forensic to the last degree, and lacked the personality and feeling which characterised the speech for the prosecution.

"I stand here," he said, in an easy rapid way which showed how little the responsibility of the position weighed upon him—"I stand here engaged in the most arduous, because the most responsible, of all tasks. I defend a lady from a charge which, in this illustrious Abbey of Thelema, might almost be construed into an imputation—my learned Brother need not rush into denials—I say almost an imputation upon a reputation as deservedly spotless as the white evening dress in which my client wins all hearts. My learned Brother, whose conscience, I rejoiced to observe, overcame the recklessness with which he started, so that from an accuser he became an advocate, rightly mentioned one or two leading cases decided long ago in the Courts of our ancestors. It is interesting and, indeed, instructive, to be reminded of these leading cases, even although they have no bearing upon the case before the Court. Still, it is well to know that those who plead in these Courts are learned in the law. But my learned Brother omitted to mention those cases which actually bear upon the question before us. Ladies and most honourable Sisters, we must not for a moment allow ourselves to lose sight of the fact that the point raised touches every one of you. Nothing can be more important, no cases have been more frequent, than those which concern the conduct of a lady towards her lover or lovers. It has been asked, for instance, whether the lover should prefer that the lady should first kiss him, or that he should first kiss the lady. The question is one on which much discussion could even now be raised, and doubtless there would be differences of opinion. It has been asked—and this is a question which actually touches the present case"—here Brother Peregrine looked at his papers and picked one out from the handful which he held—"It has been asked whether, if a lady has to listen to a tale of love which she is about to refuse, she is justified in hearing her lover to an end, or whether, in justice, she should cut him short in the beginning? I need not remind your Ladyship and the Court that the decision in this case was in favour of hearing the poor man to an end. And I humbly submit that the decision was guided partly out of respect to that instinct of kindness in woman's heart which naturally prompts to the hearing of all that could be urged, and partly, if one may venture to say so in such a presence, from a natural desire to know how this man in particular would put his points."

Here the Court smiled, as if both the President and the Sisters-assistant had large experience in such matters.

"First, then, Ladies and Sisters of the Honourable Order of Thelema, ought a demoiselle to have two lovers? Surely; that is granted by the very first laws in our Code. But, my learned friend may say, she ought to show favour to one only. In the end, I grant. That is the real point at issue between us. In the end. Up to the present, my client, my fair, my beautiful, my much-injured client, has only granted the simple favour of receiving such slight attentions, such little presents of flowers or ribbons or gloves as belong to the general usages of society and the broader and less conventional customs of Thelema. In the end, I say. But at present we are only beginning. My learned Brother, like myself, is, as one may say, in the humility of early love. What says the *trouveresse*?

"'Humbly that lover ought to speak,
Who favour from his love doth seek.'

My contention——"

"Do you," interrupted Miranda—"Do you confine yourself to the Code?"

"I do," replied the learned counsel. "But the Code is illustrated, explained and annotated by the *jeux-partis*, as my learned Brother has already explained. Still, if one must abandon precedents and fall back upon the letter of the law, I will, if you please, take the Code itself, and prove, clause by clause, if necessary, that my injured, my deeply injured client, has confined her operations, if I may so use the word, strictly within the limits of the Code——"

Here he received, from one of his clerks, a document in official writing.

"I was about to remark," he went on, "when I was interrupted by my clerk, that the Code itself will triumphantly bear out my client, and prove that she has been no traitor to those glorious laws of love which must, to the crack of doom, rule every lover in gentlehood. Let me take the second—*Qui non celat amare non potest.* 'He—or she—who cannot keep secret cannot love.' Why, here is, in itself, sufficient ground to acquit my client honourably. We will grant, if you please, that my client has a secret preference for one—not necessarily the one whom she has known longest—of the two aspirants. What better justification for accepting the service of both, than the fact that she has a secret preference for one?"

Here the orator paused while one of his clerks poured him out a glass of water, and while he looked round, expectant of applause. There was a murmur, which might have meant applause and might have meant astonishment. Tom, at his desk, looked disgusted. It seemed as if the wind was being taken out of his sails altogether.

"The third clause," the counsel continued, "is 'Nemo duplici potest amore ligari'—'No one can be bound by a twofold love.' Well, my Lady and Sisters of this Honourable House, although my learned Brother based his whole argument upon this one clause, the force of which I readily concede to him, as a matter of fact, it has no bearing whatever upon the question. For, if you will consider, the charge is that the lady has accepted presents and service from two aspirants at the same time. That is so. We grant it. Does it follow that she is bound by a twofold love—that she has professed to entertain a preference for both? Ladies of Thelema, as one of the two men, I emphatically deny it."

Here Brother Lancelot arose with flushing cheeks, and asked whether his learned Brother was to be understood as speaking from his own knowledge, and as conveying to the Court the information that he himself, Brother Peregrine, was regarded by Sister Rosalind with no preference whatever?

The defendant was here observed to smile.

The counsel for the defence made reply, softly:

"I speak from information given by the defendant herself. I do not dare to go beyond that information. It may be, unhappily for me, that Sister Rosalind has a preference for my learned Brother, or had before this case came on. That may be so, although there is not a tittle of evidence to submit before the Court for or against that supposition. It is only when the lady has accepted a lover in title as well as his simple offerings, that she can be said at all *amore ligari*, to be bound in love. But as yet the Sister Rosalind has bestowed that title on no one; therefore, I maintain, she can in no sense be said to be *duplici amore ligari*, bound by a double love.

"This point established, I pass on to another clause which, as I shall show clearly and distinctly, makes in my favour. It is written in the fourth Article: 'Semper amorem minui vel cresci constat'—'Always must love increase or be diminished.' What more rational course for my fair client to adopt than, before pronouncing finally in his favour or against him, to allow his passion to increase, or if it will not bear the test of patience, to see it diminish, and meanwhile to gratify him, or both of them, or any number of them, not one Brother only, but saving the duty and devotion owed to you, most honourable Ladies of the Court and Sisters of Thelema, not one Brother only, I say, but all the Brothers together?

"Let me pass over a few clauses which, without anyingenuity, could be shown to be so many fair and just arguments for my client, whose cause, however, is so simple that she wants no clause of the Code except those which at once commend themselves to all. I refer you, therefore, at once to the twelfth Law: 'Amor semper consuevit ab avaritiæ domiciliis exulari'—'Love is banished from the abodes of avarice.'"

Here Brother Lancelot sprang to his feet.

"I protest," he cried hotly, "I protest against this attempt to introduce an unworthy motive. Nothing, I am convinced——"

The Lady President leaned forward, and interrupted him.

"Nothing of the kind, Brother Lancelot," she said, "could be imputed to you, and no one could believe that you had or could impute unworthy motives to the defendant. The Court, indeed, is astonished that the counsel for the defence could think it necessary even to allude to this clause in connection with the case."

"If my learned Brother," said Brother Peregrine gently, "had heard me to the end, he would have been spared the necessity for his protest. Nothing was farther from my intentions than to connect the vulgar vice of avarice with him or with my client. It was in another sense: the avarice which would grudge the smallest favours bestowed on others, the avarice which is akin to jealousy, the avarice which belongs to a too sensitive organisation, and which would make of love an absolute servitude, the avarice which is a sentiment contrary to the spirit of this illustrious House of Thelema; it is concerning that avarice that I would have spoken, but I refrain. Better omit some things which might be said than incur the chance of misconception or misrepresentation."

The advocate shook his head and sighed sadly, as if the stupidity of the other counsel was the subject of grave pity. Then he went on again. All this time the defendant, sitting wrapped in her long robe of grey, wore her hood drawn entirely over her head, so that no part of her face could be seen.

"Let us proceed, and now I shall be brief. It is written again in the thirteenth Article: 'Amor raro consuevit durare vulgatis'—'Love seldom lingers when 'tis told.' Ladies, what more cogent reason for my client to disguise her preference, to procrastinate, to keep all aspirants in doubt while secretly inclining to one? In this case there are two, both Brothers of this noble House of Thelema, both ready to devote themselves assiduously to this one damoiselle. Why should she wish her choice to be divulgated, if indeed she has already chosen?

"I will, however, leave this point, and call your attention to the twenty-fourth clause of the Code, which in a very remarkable manner bears upon the case before the Court. 'Verus amans nihil beatum credit nisi quod cogitet amanti placere'—

'The true lover believes nothing but what he believes will please the lady.' The true lover! Mark those words. Has it, I ask, pleased my deeply-injured client to be the subject of this important trial, to have it even insinuated that she has infringed the Code of Love? The true lover!"

Here Brother Lancelot sprang to his feet, and was about to protest, when the Court ordered him to have patience.

"I will now only call your attention to two more clauses," continued the counsel for the defence. "In the twenty-sixth Article we read: 'Amor nihil posset leviter amore denegari'—'Love cannot lightly be denied of love.' My Lady Abbess and Sisters of this Honourable House, what are we to think of a Brother who is so lightly turned away from Love——"

"I AM NOT!" shouted Tom, springing to his feet in a real rage.

This time there was irresistible applause; and even Sister Rosalind half raised her veil as if to give her opponent one look of gratitude.

"Si—lence in the Court!" cried the usher.

Miranda did not reprove this manifestation, and Brother Peregrine, whose myriad crows'-feet seemed to twinkle all over, and whose eyes lightened up at the interruption as if in hope of a good battle of words, threw his gown behind him and stood defiant.

But Tom sat down, and the applause ceased, and the Court awaited the continuation of the speech.

"What shall we say," he asked, "of one who, because his mistress accepts the service of others, thinks there is nothing left for him but to go away and weep? Lastly, ladies, I adduce, without a word of comment—because my learned Brother has already dwelt too long upon this clause, from his own erroneous point of view—I adduce, and beg you most carefully to remember, the thirty-first Article, in which it is asserted that 'Unam fœminam nihil prohibet à duobus amari'—'Nothing prevents a damoiselle from being loved by two men.' What, indeed!—or by fifty? And what is this case before us but an exact and literal illustration of the commandment? In acting, as she has wisely chosen to act, my client, I maintain, has proved herself as learned in the constitution of Love as she is, by her nature and her loveliness, one of Love's fairest priestesses.

"My Lady Abbess and Sisters of this Honourable House, I have said what seemed to my poor understanding the best to be said. If I have failed, which I cannot believe, in conveying to you, not only the legal aspect of the case, which is clear, but also what may be called the moral aspect—I have failed if I have not convinced you of the innocence of my client, even in thought. My learned Brother has invited you to find against her, and to mitigate the penalty. I, for my part, invite you to find for her, and to allow her all the honours of a triumphant success. To his eulogium I have nothing to add. You, who value the freedom of your sex—you, who estimate rightly the value of the Code by which your conduct is guided, will accord to my client a fair, an honourable, and a complete acquittal."

Brother Peregrine sat down amid dead silence. There was no applause at all. His speech was brilliant, eloquent, and brilliantly delivered. But it lacked, what characterised Tom's less ambitious effort, reality of feeling. It was theatrical, therefore the effect was cold.

Miranda asked if the counsel for the prosecution had anything to say in reply.

Brother Lancelot said that a great deal might be spoken in answer to his learned Brother, but that he should not inflict a second speech needlessly upon the Court. He contended only that his original arguments remained untouched; that the adroit attempt of the counsel for the defence to turn a legal argument into a personal attack had clearly failed; that the clauses which he ingeniously twisted and turned to suit his case had nothing really to do with it; that in the interests of order, and in the maintenance of that true freedom which was the pride and glory of Thelema, he prayed a conviction, but asked for mitigation of penalty.

Then he sat down, and the Court proceeded to deliberate.

The case, which had been begun almost as a burlesque, or at least as an unreal revival of an ancient custom, was now, owing to the pleadings on either side, assuming a very real interest to the spectators. It was clear that the feelings of one of the speakers were very real indeed. Of that there could be no doubt; and as everybody knew perfectly well that poor Tom was only unsuccessful on account of his poverty, and as it was suspected that the fair defendant was as ready to make her open choice of Tom as he was to offer his suit and service, and as there appeared in the speech of Brother Peregrine a ring of flippancy, as if he was only showing his cleverness, the sympathies of the audience were entirely with the prosecution. Meantime, the Sisters crowded round the Throne, conferred with the President in whispers, and then there was an awful pause.

The colloquy lasted a quarter of an hour, during which everybody on the terrace talked in whispers.

And then there was a general rustle of dresses and movement among the chairs, because the conference of the Sisters was over, and they were returning to their chairs. But the pages who had been lying at their feet were standing now behind them, and the javelin-men were gathered behind the Throne, and the trumpeters were on either side of the President, and the clerks were collecting all the papers.

Miranda rose, and all the Court with her. Sister Rosalind advanced a step and stood before the counsel's desk. At the first words of the President she threw back her hood and stood as before, pale, beautiful, and resigned.

"Sister Rosalind," said the Judge, in the clear full tones of her fine contralto. "Sister Rosalind, the Court has considered the case, with the assistance of the Ladies of Thelema; we are unanimously of opinion that the continuous acceptance of flowers, gloves, or ribbons from more than one aspirant is a thing contrary to the Code of Love. We, therefore, find that you have been guilty of an infringement of the law. At the same time, the Court is equally unanimous in finding that you have been led into this infringement by no unworthy motive, and that your fair reputation remains unsullied. The penalty inflicted by the Court is that you receive an admonition, in such terms as his courtesy will allow, from the prosecutor in the case, Brother Lancelot himself. And it is the pleasure of this Court that the admonition be privately administered in this garden. Before the Court rises, I have to invite our friends" (Miranda looked round the terrace, full of spectators) "to the Refectory of the Abbey. Hospitality has ever been the duty of monastic orders, and here there is no *jour maigre*."

She stepped down from her Throne. The trumpets blew: the band struck up a march: the pages lifted her train: Brother Bayard gave her his hand, and similarly escorted, the Sisters followed. After them marched Desdemona herself, her brow knitted with legal problems. Then came clerks, javelinmen, and the usher of the Court.

The spectators left the terrace and crowded after the procession, which made straight for the great hall.

Nobody was left but Brother Lancelot and Sister Rosalind, who was waiting for her admonition. The garden was quite empty: not a servant, not a page, was there to see.

"Oh! Tom," she cried, throwing off the cloak and clapping her hands. "It was lovely; it was something to live for. What can I do for you for your beautiful speech? It was ten times as good as Mr. Exton's—and because you meant it all," she added softly.

"Nelly," said the admonitor, taking her hands, "you know what I want you to give me."

She shook her head.

"It cannot be . . . Poor old Tom . . . Poor Nelly."

"Then you do love me—Nell—just a little?"

It wanted but this last touch.

> "Ask me no more, for at a breath I yield."

He had her two hands in his, and, as he spoke, he drew her gently, so that, without suspecting, her cheek met his cheek, and her lips met his lips.

"Tom! Tom!" she cried.

"Do you love me, then; do you love me, Nell?" he persisted.

"Tom—you know I do."

"And not that other fellow at all?"

"No, Tom; not at all. Only you."

This was a pretty kind of admonition to bestow upon a penitent which followed this declaration.

All that need be said, so far as details go, is that the admonition lasted but a moment—fleeting indeed are all the joys of life—and then she forced her hands from his grasp, and drew back with a cry and a start.

"Oh! Tom. And it can never be. Because I have got to marry the other man. No; it is no use. Mamma says so. She writes to me to-day; she says that nothing else would persuade her to let me remain in this place, where one of the Brothers, a gentleman by birth, wears a smock-frock, and has set the irreligious and unchristian example of marrying a dairymaid. 'No one,' she says, 'can tell whose principles may not be subverted by this awful act of wickedness.' And I am only to wait until Mr. Exton proposes, and then to go home at once."

"Oh! And you think, Nell, that he looks like—like proposing?"

"I am sure of it, Tom, I am sorry to say."

"And you think you will marry him?"

"Yes, I must."

"Oh!" He dug his heel in the turf, and said savagely, "You must. We shall see."

When Tom led Nelly to her place in the Refectory, five minutes later, she had thrown off the grey mantle and hood, as he had discarded the black gown and square cap; and she was dressed, like the other Sisters, in complete twelfth century costume—armour, Brother Peregrine called it. She looked bright and pleased; but some of the guests, including Lord Alwyne, thought there was the trace of a tear upon her cheek. However, the music was playing, and the feast was going on merrily, and the champagne was flowing, and there were so many delightful girls round him, that Lord Alwyne had no time to look more closely.

"This is delightful," he said to Desdemona, next to whom he was sitting. "This brings back one's youth: this reminds one of the past. It is like a dream to see so many lovely girls all together in the same place. There is no place like this Abbey of yours:

"'Old as I am, for ladies' love unfit,
The power of beauty I remember yet.'

I am like La Fontaine. I bask in their smiles when I can no longer win their hearts. Where are my glasses? Ah! glasses —*bon jour*, *lunettes*, *adieu*, *fillettes*, as the Frenchman said. A man's day is done when he wants glasses to see fair eyes."

"And your son?"

"Graveairs is teaching political economy to his dairymaid. I think, Desdemona, that I should have liked myself to administer that admonition to Nelly all alone in the garden. But no doubt Tom did it with more solemnity. And the rogue looks as if it had not been an unpleasant task. I shall ask Nelly, presently, to tell me in what terms he bestowed the admonition. What *would* her mother have said?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

"'Away,' she cried, 'grave heart and solemn sighs!
Kiss and be merry: preach the sermon after.
Give me the careless dance and twinkling eyes:
Let me be wooed with kisses, songs, and laughter.'"

ALMA'S delirium of triumph reached its climax on the Sunday morning when, in self-conscious grandeur, she ambled up the aisle behind her mother. Alan was not in the church, being, as his *fiancée* presently reflected with a jealous pang, most likely with Miss Dalmeny. This circumstance, however, was perhaps fortunate, because even Alan's loyalty might hardly have stood the test of that triumphal march up the aisle, that tossing of the head which made his betrothed an object of envy to a few, and of sniggering contempt to many. Those who most envied, longed, and bitterly reproached the partiality of fate, were especially the two young ladies who just missed the golden apple. What had they done that Alma alone should be singled out for this special good fortune? As for those Sisters of the Order who were attending the service, feelings of quite peculiar wonder and pity for their unfortunate Brother passed across their minds and hindered their devotions.

Harry was not at church either, a fact which Alma speedily ascertained by looking for him in his usual place. She was sorry for that, too. She felt that she could have enjoyed furtively contemplating his black looks. The girl was dressed in a simple stuff, which Alan asked her mother, whose taste he could trust, to buy for her. She resented the simplicity of the costume, which she would have preferred, I think, made up in red velvet, the splendour of which would have increased the envy of other maidens, and she resented certain enforced restrictions as to ribbons, of which she would have liked an assortment in various colours. But she had the sense to give way, on the hint from her mother that Mr. Dunlop would prefer a quiet dress.

"You've got," said her mother severely, "to try and be a lady—to look at, I mean—if you can. I've never interfered with your bits of finery, though many's the time it's gone to my heart to see a gell of mine go about for all the world like a gipsy wench round a may-pole. But I know what Mr. Dunlop is used to, and you've got to take my advice now. Lord! Lord! What an unnatural thing it is, to be sure!"

"As if I was the only girl in the world that a gentleman has fallen in love with."

"Fallen in love!" echoed her mother. "Fallen in love, indeed! And with you! Why, what's your good looks compared to Miss Miranda or Miss Nelly or any of the young ladies at the Court? And what's your silly saucy ways compared with their beautiful talk? And what sort of manners have you got, I should like to know, compared with theirs? Fallen in love! It's all a part of the poor young gentleman's craziness."

She went about her work, this unnatural mother, with lips that moved in silent talk, because she was greatly disturbed in her mind. It seemed to her honest soul like treachery towards the memory of her dead mistress. And, as she told Alma, she knew ladies, and she knew the ways that gentlemen are used to.

"Your manners!" she went on, piling it up—this sort of truth-hearing is really very painful. "Whatever in the world Mr. Dunlop will say when he sees you sit at your dinner, I don't know. You take your victuals—well, you take 'em like your father. And I can't say worse for you."

"You had better tell father so," returned Alma. "But, mother, now," she put on her coaxing way, "if you'll tell me, little by little, you know, because I can't learn it all at once, what I'll have to alter, I'll try. I really will. And you should like to see me a real lady, shouldn't you?"

But Mrs. Bostock shook her head.

"I shall never see that," she said. "Ladies are born and bred, not made to order. Lord bless you, child, you'll never make more than a tin-kettle lady."

This was not the opinion of her father, who accepted the position as one due to the singular merit of his daughter and the fact of his own training. The Bailiff, in fact, spent his time, now, chiefly in self-laudation. He assumed the importance which seemed to befit the post of the Squire's father-in-law. He went to market and talked loudly of his son-in-law: he more than hinted at important changes about to be made in the management of the estates: and he patronised those large tenants to whom he had before been servile.

Needless to say that the voice of popular opinion, as expressed by the tenants, was that the Squire, of whose sanity there had long been grievous doubt, was now gone stark-staring mad. Some among them wanted to get up a deputation to Lord Alwyne asking for advice and assistance; but this fell through.

Alma's hours of triumph were fewer than those which her father enjoyed. To sit in church and feel that the eyes of Weyland maidenhood were on you, with looks of envy and longing, was grand. But during the long week, the six days of labour, there was no such soul-ennobling solace to be got. All day long, the future mistress of Weyland Court went on with her accustomed labour: milked the cows and fed the fowls; made the butter and peeled the potatoes.

"I thought," she said to her mother, "that you wanted me to be a lady. Ladies don't scour milk-pans."

"If ladies don't scour milk-pans," replied the woman of experience, "they do something else. If you didn't do the housework, you'd sit with your hands in your lap, or you'd go out and get into mischief. That's not the way to be a lady. Talk o' you gells! You think that a lady's got nothing to do but lazy away her idle time. I haven't patience with you. And you to marry a gentleman!"

Before this unlucky engagement Mrs. Bostock had got on fairly well with her daughter. There were skirmishes, dexterous exchanges of rapier-thrusts between tongues as sharp as steel, in which one gave and the other took, or the reverse, with equal readiness. And neither bore malice. Also, both stood side by side against the common enemy. Stephen Bostock, as parent and husband, was alternately morose and ferocious. In the former mood he had to be met with silence or short answers; in the latter he had to be stood up to. When he was meditating schemes of plunder he was morose: when his schemes failed, which generally happened, because success in roguery requires as much acuteness as success in honest undertakings, he became ferocious. And on those occasions it would have been delightful for the bystander, were there any, to witness how, by full facers from his wife and half-aside "cheek" from his daughter, the unhappy man would be goaded into rages which left nothing to be desired except a victim. "Very handy," as Harry Cardew observed—"Very handy he was, 'cept when there was a man about." But of late years he had abstained, probably from fear of the consequences, from actually carrying his threats into execution and beating his offspring into a mash.

Things had gone badly with the Bostocks until the head of the house was appointed Bailiff. Then, things went better.

As it was easy to cheat the Squire, and operations of quite an extensive character began with the very commencement, gloomy moroseness became the silence of thoughtful reflection, and habitual ferocity was softened into the occasional "damn." But, in this sudden and unexpected access of good fortune, the chances of Harry Cardew sank lower and lower. The honest gamekeeper found himself more and more unwelcome at the farmhouse, until one day, a few months before Alma's engagement, he was informed in no measured terms by the Bailiff, that a young man of like calling and social position with himself could by no means be accepted as a candidate for his daughter's hand. The Bailiff put his point in coarse but vigorous English. It made a short sentence, and it left no possible room for doubt or mistake. He weakened it by a threat of personal violence which, addressed to the young giant before him from one so puffy and out of condition as himself, was ludicrous; but the rule, as lawyers say, was absolute. Harry must cease his visits.

And presently came this rosy, this sapphire-and-amaranth-tinted position of things; when the Bailiff's daughter, not of Islington but of Weyland, was actually engaged to be married to the Squire and the son of the Squire. Then it was that Stephen Bostock assumed the airs of superiority which so riled and offended the farmers. Then it was that he became all at once the loving, even the doating, father. Then it was that he walked the fields in the evening revolving great dreams of agricultural rule. Then it was that he looked through the veil which generally hides the misty ways of futurity, and saw himself, Stephen Bostock, living in great splendour, held in much honour of all men, drinking quantities of brandy and water among a circle of worshippers, and smoking a pipe among other pipes, all of which were myrrh and frankincense offered to himself, the wise, the crafty, the successful Bostock. Then it was that he began to fondle, to caress, and to cuddle his only child, until his endearments became painful, even insufferable, to the young lady; and she would run away and hide herself to get out of his way. And then it was that he discovered that his wife, whom he had hitherto reverenced as a person intimately acquainted, through her experience as lady's-maid, with the habits, customs, and predilections of the aristocracy, was really nothing better than a shallow pretender to this kind of knowledge, because she objected, from the very beginning, to her daughter's engagement with the Squire.

"You may swear, Stephen," she would say, what time Alma was in bed and her husband was contemplating things through the rosy light which comes of the third or fourth tumbler of grog—"You may swear, Stephen, as much as you like. And what a man would do without swearing, smoking, and drinking, the Lord only knows. Swearing can't make things different; and it's unnatural. It's unnatural, I say."

When Stephen first found his appropriate adjective for the situation, he slapped his leg in rejoicing. When Mrs. Bostock found hers, she cut the thread with which she was working—being a woman who was perpetually sewing—with a sharper snap than usual.

Stephen swore again, but with a murmurous tone of satisfaction, because the light upon the future was growing more roseate, more beautiful.

"A son-in-law," he said, "as is the Squire of this great state; a son-in-law worth—ah!—his twenty thousand a year; a son-in-law as is, between you and me, wife, a little loose in the upper story; that kind o' son-in-law doesn't grow on every bush, and is to be encouraged when he does come. Encouraged he shall be. Fooled he shall be, if I can fool him. And henpecked he will be, for sure and certain, when our Alma once gets her tongue free, and her tail well up, and her claws out. And as regards wild cats, I will say that, for a wild cat, once you wake her up, there's no gell in all Weyland like my gell."

"Yes," said her mother, "she's the Bostock temper. As for my family, we're that meek——"

"You are," replied the husband, finishing his tumbler: "you're as meek as the Irish pig——" He did not explain this allusion, which remains obscure.

It will be seen that these influences were not the highest or the most promising which could be brought to bear on the mind of a young woman about to marry a young man oppressed with great possessions. But Alma had been brought up under them, and knew no other. It will also be seen that the outlook to Alan, in search of a helpmeet, would have seemed to him, had he known as much as we know, sufficiently dark.

All day long spent in household and dairy labour: and then, alas! all the evening to be got through with her unintelligible lover. Poor Alma! Poor bride-elect! They talked and walked, these fine July evenings, chiefly in the garden of the farm, that long strip of ground planted with raspberry-canes and gooseberry-bushes, and walled on either hand by an apple-orchard. In the dusk and sweet summer twilight they walked up and down the narrow walk, arm in arm, while Alan discoursed and Alma tried to listen, failed to understand, and let her thoughts run off on Harry. More than once she saw the unlucky gamekeeper at the garden gate, looking wistfully into the garden like the Peri into Paradise, and her heart leaped up, and it wanted but a word, a beckoning, a gesture from her humble lover to make her dare all, throw down the ring of King Cophetua, and rush to the place where she would fain be, the arms of the man who knew her for what she was, and did not believe her to be a saint.

For really, poor Mr. Dunlop was too unbearable.

Does any girl, *could* any girl, like being improved after her engagement or her marriage? I once knew a man who was very, very intellectual. He was quite familiar with everything that is lofty, abstruse, and unintelligible; he read his *Fortnightly* with more regularity than he read his Bible; he lived, so to speak, and found his nourishment entirely in the Higher Criticism; Mill, Bain, and Herbert Spencer were far, far behind him; and yet he used to clasp his two hands across his massive brow, and say that what we want—meaning mankind at large, including himself—is More Brain Power. This man married a wife, and resolved, as he told all his friends, upon moulding her. Many men have resolved upon moulding their wives, and have not discovered until too late that their wives have moulded *them*. My friend began very much as Alan Dunlop began, only *mutatis mutandis*. He did not lecture her, or teach her. He got her a ticket for the British Museum Library, took her there, and looked out useful books for her to read—Mill, Bain, and Spencer, the elementary prophets. No one, of course, will be surprised to hear the end of this mournful reminiscence. The young wife made the acquaintance of a young man who sat next to her, and was engaged at a low wage in the Translation Department of the eminent publishers, Messrs. Roguepogue, Gulchit, and Co. I believe he was weak in French, and used to ask his fair neighbour for help in difficult passages. One day they went out at luncheon-time together. Neither of them returned their books, and neither of them ever came back again. And there was great unpleasantness afterwards.

Similarly, there is the well-known case of the æsthetic man—one is almost ashamed to quote it—who wanted to train his wife in true principles of Art, and used to carry her about to Picture Galleries and make her sit for hours in front of Martyrs and Saints going to be tortured, till she grew at last to take a savage and unchristian pleasure in thinking that those heads with the golden halos held on one side and those figures stuck out ecclesiastically stiff, would shortly be roasting at the stake. She revenged herself by dressing one night, when they were dining with quite awfully æsthetic people in a costume of red, green, and yellow. Her husband caught sight of it in the middle of dinner. They carried him away, and his wife went with him. Just as he rallied and came round, he saw it again. In his weak condition, it was too much. She is a widow now, with no taste at all for Art.

Alan Dunlop, rapidly discovering that his future wife was not as yet quite the young person he had dreamed of, resolved, like our friends, the Intellectual and the Artistic Prigs, to "mould" his wife.

He moulded her in two ways.

First, he lent her books to read.

The books he chose were those to which he owed, he thought, the ideas which most governed his own life. Among these were Ruskin's *Two Paths*, the *Sesame and Lilies*, and a selection from the *Fors Clavigera*. He forgot that what a man takes away from a book is precisely what he brings to it, only that much developed, that his mind is like the soil already planted, digged about for air and light, and weeded of false notions. Alma, poor girl, brought nothing to the study of the *Fors* but a blank mind. She understood no single word. First, she did try to read the books: read on, page after page, although the words had no meaning, and, when she put the volumes down, left nothing behind them but a sort of blurr, haze, and bad dream of meaningless sentences which seemed to follow her, to whisper their gibberish in her ear, and to haunt her dreams at night like devils and ghosts. That plan would clearly never do. Then she hit upon another. She would learn a bit and try to repeat it, to show that she really had read the whole. This succeeded tolerably the first evening, but on the second she broke down suddenly and horribly, collapsed, went off into nonsense, and finally foundered altogether.

The second method adopted by Alan was to lecture his *fiancée*.

He spent hours every day in expounding the elementary principles of his philosophy, and he hoped that she would readily grasp the science in which women are supposed to have done so much—social and political economy. He hoped that she would become a second Harriet Martineau. As a matter of fact, I believe that the success of women in Political Economy is due to their acceptance of unproved theories as if they were truths demonstrated beyond all doubt. By this method they have built up a structure which spiteful people say will go to pieces in the first gale of wind. However, Alma listened, and understood nothing. The lecturer went on, but his words poured into her ears while her thoughts were far away.

And then there followed a very curious state of things.

While Alan talked, Alma allowed her thoughts to wander away. She listened mechanically, prepared to smile and murmur when his voice ceased for a moment. Now, after the first preamble with which Alan opened up the subject of his engagement and exposed his reasons, he took it for granted that Alma understood exactly why he wanted to marry her and how they were to live. Alma, who had forgotten all about the preamble, which she never understood, looked on her marriage as elevation to the rank of a lady, dreamed continually of Weyland Court, and let Alan go on talking of their future in his obscure manner without interruption. That she was to go on living in the village would have seemed too absurd. Far better brave all and marry Harry Cardew.

But what a lover! And what an engagement! And never a kiss, never a hand-squeeze, never the least sigh; only a grave "How do you do, Alma?" or "Good-night, Alma," with a cold shake of the hand and a look of those deep, grave, blue eyes, which always when they met her own made the country girl tremble and shake to think of long days and nights to be spent always beneath their solemn, almost reproachful gaze.

What a lover! What an engagement! And, oh! bliss—to run out for five minutes only, when Mr. Dunlop was gone, to meet Harry in the orchard, and he with his arm round her waist like a man, and ready with his honest old lips upon her cheek. And, ah! Heaven! if her father, or her mother, or Mr. Dunlop himself should ever know!

After the political economy Alan proceeded to the difficulties which more immediately occupied him, connected with the reform of the lower classes. He gave her a lecture on temperance, which was not needed because her father, no doubt from the highest of motives, had frequently enacted the Helot before her; and, like all women of her class, she regarded drink with the loathing that comes of experience. Then he spoke of woman's influence over other women.

Alma regarded this as a question of authority. Had she been placed over half a hundred maids, she would have ruled them all, or known the reason why: and she failed to comprehend what Alan meant when he talked beautifully about the common bond of womanhood, and the sweetness of woman's sympathy with other women. Alma thought of Black Bess, and regretted that she was not strong enough to shake her, because she knew that young person to be harbouring thoughts of malice and revenge against herself.

Alan went on to talk of the sympathies of class with class, of the natural tendency of human nature to form itself into strata, of the difficulties of passing from one to the other. Alma thought that she herself would pass with the greatest ease from the lower to the higher—and of the helpful nature of alliances formed between members of one and another. "He is really quite mad," thought the girl. And he tried to draw a picture of a pair living together, devoted like any Comtist to the enthusiasm of Humanity: working out problems in civilisation, leading upwards to the Higher Culture whole droves of smock-frocks, navvies, roughs, whose principal delights heretofore had been beer-drinking, pipe-smoking, leaning against posts, and kicking their wives.

"Harry," cried Alma one evening, after nearly a week of this, "he most drives me mad, he does! Either he talks like a schoolmaster, or else he talks like a parson in a pulpit. He's not like a man. Preach? Every day and all day. And goodness gracious only knows what he says. What does he take me for?"

"Heart up, pretty," said Harry. "Heart up. He shan't have you. Never you fear."

"Ah!" she sighed sentimentally. "I should like to be mistress of Weyland Court. That would be grand, if he wasn't there too. And yet to have him always looking at me with those solemn eyes of his, as if—well—as if he was going to begin another sermon; it's hardly worth it. Harry. And after all, everybody must like a man better than a preaching doll. And true love—oh! Harry—what a thing that is to read about in the story-books!"

"Ay—Alma—it is. True Love will wash, as the song says!"

"And then—" she burst into a low laugh—"only think, Harry, what a rage father would be in. He'd go round—how he would go round! And he couldn't beat me to a mash, as he used to say he would, because—"

"Because," said Harry, huskily, "I'd beat any man to a hundred mashes as offered to raise his hand again my little girl."

CHAPTER XXVII.

"We may live so happy there
That the spirits of the air,
Envying us, may even entice
To our healing paradise
The polluting multitude."

Miranda allowed a fortnight to pass after Alan's engagement before she drove over to make a closer acquaintance with the young lady, her future sister-in-law, as she began to say to herself. Mrs. Bostock was a friend of many years' standing, but with her daughter Miranda had but little intercourse, and with the great Stephen Bostock, her husband, none at all. It was therefore lucky that when she drove over to the farm, the Bailiff, whose approaching connection with the Great caused him to assume overwhelming airs, graces, and ease of familiarity, was out on the farm, bullying the labourers. Alma, too, was down in the village on some quest of her own, and Mrs. Bostock alone was in the place to receive her visitor.

She was ashamed and confused, this ex-lady's maid. It seemed a dreadful thing to her that Miss Miranda, of all people in the world, should come to her house under the circumstances. For, like everybody else, she regarded her daughter as one about to step into the place long reserved for Miss Dalmeny.

"Oh! dear, Miss Miranda," she cried. "Is it you? Come in, do. And I more than half ashamed to look you in the face. Let him walk the pony into the shade. And where will you sit? In the porch? Well, it is fresh and airy here, with the flowers and all. And how well you are looking, and what a lovely frock you've got on! But you always were as beautiful as flowers in May."

"Perhaps the fine feathers make a fine bird, Mrs. Bostock."

But Mrs. Bostock shook her head.

"No," she said. "That's what they say, but it's nonsense. 'Tis but a jay in peacock's plumes, all done and ended. That's what I say to Alma: 'Trick yourself out,' I say, 'just as you like.' It's what I say to Bostock, and it makes him mad. 'Put what you like on the gell,' I say, 'and she's Alma Bostock still.' Lady? Not a bit of a lady. You might——" her eyes wandered from the flower to the vegetable garden. "You might as well plant a onion in the flower-bed and think you'll get a tulip."

"I came to see you on purpose about Alma."

Mrs. Bostock, a little relieved by the declaration of sentiments which, she felt, did her credit in Miranda's eyes, sat down in the porch opposite her visitor with folded hands. It was a pretty little rustic porch, with roses and honeysuckle climbing about the sides, like a cottage-porch on the stage.

"Yes," Miranda repeated; "I came to see you about Alma, now that she is going to be a kind of sister-in-law."

"No, Miss Miranda, I won't have that said. There's shame and foolishness already in letting her marry Master Alan to gratify a whim. Don't let her never say that she's your sister-in-law. Sister, indeed! I'd sister her. And nothing but misery before him."

This way of looking at things disconcerted Miranda, who had expected a sort of apologetic triumph.

"Why misery?" she asked.

"For every reason, Miss Miranda," said Mrs. Bostock. "First, Mr. Dunlop don't care for the gell, not as a gell should be cared for; and second, the gell don't care for him. And if that wasn't enough, I ask you what pleasure in life can he have with a gell who isn't a lady? And nothing will make her a lady neither."

Mrs. Bostock spoke from her experience of gentlefolk, and what she said was true enough, as Miranda very well knew.

"But the case is unusual," she pleaded. "Alan wants to marry a girl who will help him in his plans of life. Surely, Mrs. Bostock, you must own that he is the most disinterested and the noblest of men."

"Stuff an' nonsense!" replied the Bailiff's wife. "Let poor people alone to worry through in their own way. And as for Alma helping him, if ever she is his wife, which I can't believe will ever be, so unnatural it is, she won't stir her little finger for anybody but herself. And as for joining in this, that, and the other, all she thinks about now, day and night, is to be mistress of Weyland Court. And if it wasn't for that I don't believe even her father would make her marry him."

"Oh! but, Mrs. Bostock. Your own daughter!"

"If a mother don't know her own child, no one knows her. Alma's growed up at my apron-strings, and I know her ways There's only one thing for her, and that's a strong man whom she will be afraid of. She's afraid of Mr. Dunlop, in a way; but not the way I mean; and when she's got over her shyness with him, she'll begin her tricks. Why, already, she's deceived him at every turn."

"How?"

"He gives her books to read. She pretends to read them. She learns little bits and says them by heart, so as to make him think that she has read them all. Deep? There's no telling how deep the gell is. After all, we were all gells once, and many's the time I've told a fib to my lady when I ran out for a minute, to meet my Stephen in the stable-yard. But then I was not going to stick myself up for a lady."

There was a certain amount of personal jealousy in Mrs. Bostock's feelings. She had hitherto prided herself in her lady's-maid's position and the knowledge it gave her of gentlefolks' ways. Now, this superiority, as soon as her daughter was promoted to the actual position of a lady, would be reft from her. Also, she had a genuine feeling that the honour of the Dunlop family was impugned by this *mésalliance.* Needless to repeat that her husband sympathised with neither of these feelings, but, on the contrary, used violent language on what he was pleased to consider the unnatural attitude of a mother.

It was not pleasant for Miranda to hear that the girl on whom Alan built such hopes was beginning with little deceptions.

"But, Mrs. Bostock," she said, trying to make an excuse, "Alma is very young, and we must make allowances. She does not understand that it would be better to tell him clearly that the books are at present too hard for her. She will find out, presently, that it is best to have no concealment from him."

Mrs. Bostock sniffed, and tossed her head.

"You young ladies," she said, "little know. What with shifts and straits, and bad temper, and violent ways, most gells go on for ever with some deception or another. Sometimes I wonder if I was ever so sly. And they think that no one sees through them."

"It is because they do not know," said Miranda, "how much better it always is to be perfectly and entirely open with everybody."

"It's their nature to," said Mrs. Bostock.

"But you must let me do what I can," Miranda continued. "If Alma will let me be her friend, one may do a great deal more by talking, and—and by example, than by finding fault. I want to help her for the sake of Alan, you know, entirely."

"Yes, Miss Miranda, I do know. And after being with him for so many years like—like——"

"Like brother and sister."

"Like brother and sister together, it must be nothing short of dreadful to see him take up with our Alma."

"Not quite dreadful," said Miranda kindly. "Of course we should all have preferred to see him marry in his own rank."

"And Lord Alwyne, too! Poor dear gentleman!" sighed Mrs. Bostock with real sympathy. "But there—here's Alma coming home with the fal-lals she went out to buy."

Alma pushed open the garden-gate and tripped up the walk with her light elastic step.

"She *is* a pretty girl," Miranda said, watching her from the porch.

Pretty she certainly was. And this afternoon she looked animated, happy, and bright, with a flush in her cheek and a light in her eye. She had, indeed, succeeded in squeezing a sovereign out of her mother—part of certain money entrusted to Mrs. Bostock by Alan for her behalf—and had gone to the village shop to get the fal-lals imported especially for her from Athelston. On the way she had met Black Bess and interchanged a few compliments, in which she felt herself to have the superiority. Had Alan heard these remarks, he would not have felt happier. She wore the grey stuff dress with blue ribbons which her mother had made for her; she had a light straw hat upon her head, and her long bright hair lay in curls and waves over her shoulders.

I regret to say that at sight of Miranda the light went out of Alma's eyes, the smiles from her lips, the brightness from her forehead. She turned quite pale, save for an angry red spot in either cheek. This was the real lady, the lady whom she could ape but never imitate, the lady whom her mother held up to her as the impossible standard, and Mr. Dunlop as the standard to which he would have her attain. She was sick of Miss Dalmeny's name. "Miranda," said Mr. Dunlop, "thinks so and so;" or, "Miranda would. I believe, advise you in such a way;" or, "Miranda would like you to act in this or the other way." Always at school, always engaged upon a hopeless copy, of which Miss Dalmeny was the model.

And only five minutes before Black Bess had taunted her with the accusation that, though engaged to marry Mr. Dunlop, everybody knew that Miss Dalmeny was the only woman he truly loved, as she, poor Alma, would surely find out to her cost, when it was too late. And she added, this kind and friendly maiden, that she sincerely pitied her, and had done, ever since she persuaded Mr. Exton, by promising she only knew what, to give her the golden apple.

Therefore it is quite comprehensible that Alma was not delighted to see Miranda, or desirous of forming a close alliance with her.

"How do you do, Alma?" said Miranda, keeping her hand for a little. "I would not come for a few days after I heard of your engagement, because I wanted you to feel a little settled first. I hope we shall be very good friends."

"Alma should be proud and grateful," said her mother.

Alma said nothing. Miranda saw by the gleam of her eyes that she was neither proud nor grateful, only, for some reason of her own, resentful. But Miranda was not to be beaten. What reason had the girl to be resentful?

"I am going into the village to the library, Alma," she said. "Will you turn back and come with me? Unless you are tired. We shall find Alan there, very likely."

"I am not at all tired," said Alma reluctantly, because she neither wanted to see Alan herself, nor did she want Miranda to see him alone. "I will go back with you."

She tossed her paper package on the bench and turned to walk down the garden path, leading the way in a sullen and defiant manner, not pretty at all, nor significant of the Higher Culture.

Mrs. Bostock shook her head.

"Jealousy, that is," she said. "Alma's jealous of you, Miss Miranda. Well—to think that I should live to see my daughter ealous of Miss Dalmeny!"

It was not pride, but in sorrow that she spoke.

Alma volunteered no remark on the way to the library, but she was glad to see in the distance Black Bess herself at an open window, watching her as she walked side by side with Miss Dalmeny. There were, then, compensations. It was something to walk side by side with the only woman—and she a lady—whom Mr. Dunlop truly loved, and to feel that she would not let him. Miranda tried to set the girl at her ease, but in vain. Alma was sulky and awkward.

"Will you come to Dalmeny Hall, and stay with me, Alma?" she asked.

"Stay with you, Miss Miranda?" Alma opened her eyes wide.

"Yes; we are very quiet at the Hall, if you do not mind that. I must make your acquaintance now, and we must be very good friends for the future."

Alma murmured something in reply, she hardly knew what. She was walking with Miss Dalmeny. Black Bess was watching her with envy and all uncharitableness, which was like blackberry jam to her heart, and Miss Dalmeny was inviting her to stay at the Hall.

To stay at the Hall! To be sure, there would be something truly awful in the way of perpetual good manners to put up with, and how ladies and gentlemen can endure to be always on tiptoe was beyond poor Alma's comprehension. But then the grandeur: to think how her father would go round like a turkeycock in the farmyard, with swelling breast and head erect, proclaiming that his girl was at Dalmeny Hall! Perhaps she had been wrong to be so full of jealousy and sulkiness. Perhaps Miss Dalmeny meant well after all; very likely she thought that, as she could not have Alan for herself, it would be well to make friends with those who could.

Perhaps, too, she had not grasped the whole possibilities of the situation. As she walked demurely by the side of the young lady she became conscious of the extraordinary difference between her own frock and Miss Dalmeny's costume. And without realising that to wear such a costume required an education, she at once began to build dreams in her own mind of how such a dress, with such a hat and such gloves, should be her own. No doubt at sight of them Black Bess would fairly burst with spite.

In the midst of this pleasing dream they arrived at the Library.

Of course it was not to be expected that anybody would be there on this hot July afternoon, when the boys and girls were sleepily droning to the master in the school, the schoolmaster was sleepily droning to the boys and girls, the cobbler was falling asleep over his work and his latest work on Atheism, the very labourers in the fields—it was just before the harvest—were sleepily contemplating the golden grain about to fall beneath their sickles, and even the Bailiff was sleepily musing on the greatness of the future. All the world was sleepy, all the world was at rest, and the white walls of the Library—the ex-Dissenting Chapel—looked thirsty, hot, and uninviting. Two *habitués*, however, were within it, the usual two—Alan Dunlop, reading and making notes at the table, which, by constant use, he had made his own; and Prudence Driver, the librarian. She, poor thing, was engaged in a statistical return—Alan Dunlop was as *exigeant* in the matter of statistical returns as the Education Department. She was carefully extracting from her book the solid crumbs of comfort: such as that an inquirer had taken Euclid from the shelves once during the year—she omitted to mention that he brought the philosopher back in five minutes with an apology: she noted down the gratifying fact that Mill's Works had been twice taken from the shelves, once knocked down by accident, and once asked for by mistake; she found, to her joy, that inquiries had been made (by the Squire, but she did not say so) after Darwin, Carlyle, Tennyson, Froude, Huxley, Freeman, Swinburne, Morris, Matthew Arnold, Herbert Spencer, and Alexander Bain; that Robert Browning's latest poems had been taken down—by the Vicarage girls, though this did not appear; and that works not in the library, such as Volney, Toland, Voltaire's *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, Clarke's *Critical Review*, and such, had been asked after more than once. In fact, it was the cobbler, who, whenever he was a little drunk, used to drop in and terrify the girl by demanding these and other atheistical productions. As for the remaining books in request, they were vain and frivolous things, novels, story-books, travel books, anything but such as inform the intellect and advance knowledge. And yet, when Prudence Driver's sheet of returns was complete, it was such as a statistical Member of Parliament would have contemplated with the keenest satisfaction. "Can we," he might have asked, "can we any longer speak of the backward state of our village education, when in a small place of five hundred inhabitants such a return is possible? What do we see? Euclid, Mill, Bain, Spencer, Carlyle, Huxley, Darwin, Arnold, and Tennyson in eager request; Volney, Toland, and Voltaire asked for—what would honourable members wish for more, even in the Bodleian or the University Library of Cambridge?"

The quiet, pale-faced girl, who alone, with Miranda, believed in the young Reformer, looked up eagerly as the visitors entered the library. Perhaps it might be some new convert to the glories of self-culture, somebody really wanting to read Mill. No. It was Miss Miranda, and with her—Alma. At sight of her Prudence Driver resumed her task, a set gloom suddenly developing on her face. Alma Bostock represented the one false, the fatally false move taken by Mr. Dunlop. Her instinct told her that there would be nothing in common between her Prophet and a girl whose character and conduct were of the most frivolous. And here was Miss Miranda actually walking about with her! Did they not know, then?

"You, Miranda, and Alma! And together! This is very kind, Miranda," cried Alan, starting from his chair. "What brings you here?"

"I was calling on Alma, and we thought we would come down here and find you out," Miranda replied, speaking for Alma as well as herself. "We wanted to know how you are getting on?"

"I am getting on badly," said Alan. "There is no possible doubt on that point. But we shall do better presently, shall we not, Alma?"

Alma looked up and smiled, but not with her eyes. Prudence Driver noticed, with a pang of wrath, that there was no sympathy in her look. How *could* a man be fooled by such a girl! She dug her pen into the ink, and went on with her statistics. "'Swiss Family Robinson,' six times taken out; 'Robinson Crusoe,' eight times; 'Pilgrim's Progress,' twenty times;" and so on.

"I have quite decided on giving up the field-work," said Alan. "After nearly a year of it, I think I may claim to have tried by actual experience all that a farm labourer has to do."

"And about the eighteen shillings a week, Alan?" asked Miranda, smiling.

"Well"—he smiled too; it was the one of his failures of which he was least ashamed—"there is a great deficit in the accounts. Look, I have actually spent five and twenty shillings a week." He drew a paper from his pocket-book, which he handed to Miranda, who looked at it and passed it to Alma.

"And yet, you see, the item of beer does not enter into the account at all."

"They have cheated you," said Alma, rather grimly. Prudence Driver started. How could Alma know what she had long suspected? She forgot that she was a little stay-at-home, while Alma went about and heard the truth.

"Who has cheated me?" asked Alan.

"Everybody has cheated you. The butcher, the baker, the grocer, the milkman, the boys at the store. They all charge you double what they charge us, and they give you bad weight. Why, we have all known that ever since you came here. What did you expect, Mr. Dunlop?"

"Is it possible? I have always trusted what they say." He spoke in a helpless way. "Do you mean, Alma, that everybody in the village is dishonest?"

"Everybody," she replied, calmly. She would have added, "And my father the worst of all;" but she dreaded the paternal wrath. "Everybody," said Alma.

"This, Miranda," observed the Reformer, "only shows one practical and very useful side of our engagement. Alma can begin her career of usefulness by putting a stop to these wretched little rogueries. She will make them feel how utterly degrading are their cheating ways. What can be done with people who steal? The Higher Culture necessitates, as a mere foundation, the possession, not only of simple honesty, but also that of Honour—the Principle which in the Modern School replaces or supplements Religion."

"But, Alan," said Miranda, "it is dreadful to think that you have been cheated all these months, and have been starving yourself to keep within an impossible allowance."

He shook his head. "I have not been starving, because I have exceeded my allowance by something like six and twenty pounds, which means ten shillings a week."

"What is the Village Parliament doing all the time, Alan?" asked Miranda.

"We have closed it. Nobody came after the supper was suppressed, and so we were obliged to dissolve *sine die*. Do not ask me about anything, Miranda. All has been one great failure, even the Co-operative Store and the Good Liquor Bar. Would you believe that the people prefer to buy their groceries at the village shop, where they are dearer and adulterated, and their beer at the Spotted Lion, where it is mixed with sugar and treacle and all sorts of stuff, instead of the pure Allsopp we sell at the Good Liquor Bar?"

"It seems stupid beyond all belief," said Miranda.

"No it isn't," interposed Alma, in her half-sullen way. "It isn't stupid at all."

"What do you mean, Alma?" asked Alan.

"I mean that just as you are cheated by the butcher and the baker, so you are cheated by your shopmen."

"How do you know that, Alma?"

"I know it—because I know it." It was not her business to tell Mr. Dunlop that she had heard the character of the two young men in Athelston, that she knew how they carried on between Saturday and Monday, and that her father made an open scoff, every day, of the shameless way in which those noble twin institutions were conducted.

"But in whatway—how can they cheat you?" Alan asked. "They have orders to put every order down in a book. The profits are to be divided among those who purchase in proportion to their purchases."

"Profits!" Alma laughed derisively.

"Please explain, Alma."

"One of them sands the sugar, mixes the tea with sloe-leaves, and waters the tobacco. The other waters the beer, and makes a sort of mess—I don't know how—with the porter. And then they don't put down what is bought. Bless you, do you think our people are going to be so particular as to see their orders entered in a book? So it isn't a bit cheaper, and nothing is a bit better than at the shop over the way. There, Miss Miranda!"

She hurled her shot as if it was a matter of deep personal concern with Miss Dalmeny that the shop should go well.

"And every Saturday," she continued, "both those precious boys go off to Athelston together."

"To see their relations?" said Alan. "I know."

"No, to get drunk and smoke at a harmonic meeting. Bless you, everybody knows it. They've been seen there, times and times."

This was pleasant intelligence.

Prudence Driver, meantime, had left her work, and creeping round in her noiseless way, stood behind Alan's chair.

"No, Alma Bostock," she said, "everybody does not know it. *I* do not. None of my own people know it. If it is true, how do you know it?"

"That doesn't signify," she replied. "Let Mr. Dunlop look into the books, and he will see."

The fact was, of course, that Bailiff Bostock, having to deal officially with the store, very early discovered the wrong-doing, set a trap, caught the offenders, used them for his own purpose, and made no secret of what he had done at home.

"It feels," said Alan, stretching out his hands helplessly, "as if one was surrounded by inextricable meshes. Ignorance and habit is expected, Miranda. But I hadn't, I confess, bargained for dishonesty."

"Then," said Alma, "you bought a pig in a poke."

It is, to be sure, a homely proverb, but perhaps there was no absolute necessity for Alan to shudder, or for Miranda to contemplate steadily the point of her parasol. Worse things might be—have been—said by young ladies of country education. Yet it did seem, even to Prudence Driver, as if there was a certain incongruity in Mr. Dunlop's bride talking of pigs in a poke.

Then Alma, feeling really as if there was no longer any reason to be afraid either of her betrothed, or of Miss Dalmeny, so long as she could communicate these startling items of intelligence, sat boldly on the table, with her feet dangling, and her hands on either side clasping the table-edge, and, all unconscious that she was, even to Prudence Driver, a very personification of ungracefulness—to be sure, Prudence read books and had opinions—went on with those startling revelations, which gave her so great a superiority to Miss Dalmeny, who knew nothing.

"What did you expect?" she said. "Lord! what could you expect? You get a lot of farm labourers — these common farm labourers—and you give them supper and beer, as much supper and beer as they liked, and you told them to discuss and become a Parliament. What did they do? What could you expect them to do? They drank all the beer, and when there was no more, they went away home. You went to work among them in a smock-frock, which is a thing no gentleman ever dreamed of doing before. They only laughed at you. I've stood in a corner of the field a dozen times and watched them laughing at you. Here's your Library. Who comes to it? Nobody. There's your Bath-room and Laundry. Who uses it? Nobody. Catch *them* washing themselves. They never did such a thing in all their lives. There's your Art Gallery. Does anybody ever go to see the pictures? Ask Prudence Driver."

The curator held down her head. The charge was too true.

"You had a theatre here, and a circus. They went to them, so long as you paid. When they had to pay for themselves, they went to the Spotted Lion. And as for your village festivals, they went to get the drink."

All this was hard to bear. And yet Alan felt that it was all literal fact, and he tried to find comfort in the thought that his future wife knew exactly what had happened.

"Is it all true, Prudence?" asked Miranda. "Do you, also, know all these things?"

"All, except about the cheating," the librarian replied. "And how Alma Bostock knows that, if it is true, I can't say."

"And it doesn't signify, if you could say," retorted Alma, in her least amiable tone.

"One thing I can do at once," said Alan, rising. "I can go and get the accounts of the store and the bar, and have them investigated. Good-bye, Miranda. Go home, Alma, and don't tell any one else what you have told me. Does not this, too, Miranda, show that I was justified? You see, at the very beginning, Alma puts her finger on the weak places of my system."

What he meant was, that the fact of Alma being up to all the wickedness which had been flourishing at his expense showed his own prudence in choosing a wife from her class, and her fitness in thus being able to read the ways of the people. He left the Library and strode off quickly to the store, which, with the bar, were quite at the other end of the village.

Observe how custom makes people careless. It was a very hot afternoon; there seemed not the least chance that any one would want to buy anything, and the young men in charge of the two departments, after their one o'clock meal, fell both fast asleep, one on each side of the table in the back office. But the safe, in which the account-books were kept, was wide open. Alan, seeing the boys asleep, and the safe open, hesitated a little. Then, reflecting that the account-books were his own, he seized them all, four in number. and carried them back with him to the Library.

There was no one there at all, now, except the librarian.

"Prudence," he said, "do you know book-keeping?"

"A little," she replied.

"Then let us shut up the Library for the day and go into the books, as well as we can, together."

It was five o'clock when the two young men awoke, yawned, stretched themselves, and complained of being athirst. One of them proceeded to take such steps as might result in tea; the other strolled lazily into the shop.

The next minute he rushed back with a pallid face and shaking hands.

"Good Lord, 'Arry! the safe's open, and the books are gone!"

That was the dreadful fact.

They looked at each other in mute horror for a brief space. Tea, sleepiness, and thirst were all alike forgotten in that supreme moment, when they suddenly realised that they were found out.

"What shall we do, Jeremiah?" asked Harry. He was pot-boy, and the gentleman with the Scriptural name, who was, as we have before explained, a Particular Baptist, was clerk to the store.

"Step it," said Jeremiah curtly. "It don't matter who's got the books. Whoever it is, we're done for. Step it."

"Where?" asked Harry.

"Anywheres," said Jeremiah, "except Athelston way."

He went to the till and extracted such small sums as were in it. These he put in his own pocket, leaving nothing for his friend.

"Now," he said, "I'm a-going for a few minutes' walk, I am. Good-bye."

He went out of the door, stood a moment in the brilliant sunshine, and then, turning to the left, disappeared.

Harry, remaining alone, was seized with so great a trembling, that he was fain to draw himself a pint and a half of beer and take that straight down. Then he felt in his pockets. Eighteen-pence. Then he realised the selfishness of Jeremiah in taking all the contents of the till. Truly, they were not much. And then, putting on his hat, he too went out into the sunshine and took a turn across the fields.

It is sufficient here to say of these two young men that neither has yet returned to Weyland; that one of them, Harry, who really was not such a bad sort to begin with, has repented, and now wears the Queen's scarlet with credit. Of Jeremiah, I only learned the other day by accident that he has recently been seen at certain suburban meetings, laying the odds with freedom. I hope he will succeed.

As for Prudence, it was not very long before she was enabled to point out that there were two sets of books kept; that the purchases set down in one varied from one-half to one-fifth of those set down in the other; and that, latterly, save in the case of the Squire himself, or Miss Dalmeny, nothing at all was set down in either book. The conclusion was obvious.

Alan went into Athelston and saw the police inspector. But when the civil power arrived, the birds were flown, and it only remained to put up the shutters. This, alas! was the end of the Weyland Co-operation Store, and the Weyland Good Liquor League.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"You speak of the people
As if you were a god to punish, not
A man of their infirmity."

MR. PAUL RONDELET, Fellow of Lothian, was growing daily more and more ill at ease. It was borne in upon him with an ever-increasing persistency, as the voice of a warning which would not be silenced, that in a brief three months, unless he took orders in the interval, he would be—it cost him agonies to put the situation into words—ACTUALLY without an income! He would be absolutely penniless. He would have to work for the daily bread which had, hitherto, always come to him without his even asking for it, unless, as an undergraduate, at perfunctory College Chapel; he, to whom the light bondage of a College Lectureship was too great a burden, whose haughty soul disdained the fetters of stipulated work, however slight, would positively have to descend into the arena and do his utmost, like quite common mortals, to earn his dinner.

"Earn"—horrid word! As if he were a labourer, or an artisan, or an apprentice, or a tradesman. Earn!

And he the leader, the acknowledged leader of a Party: almost the youngest, quite the most promising, the most hopeful of all the Oxford Parties. The old High Church people had had their innings, and were long ago played out; the Broad Church never had any real charm at logical Oxford; the Low fell out of the running long, long ago; there remained for his day the Ritualists, the Scoffers, the Sneerers, the Know-nothings, the Comtists, and the New Pagans.

The Ritualists began well, but somehow—I think it was that some of the older men belonged to the party, and so the younger men could not pride themselves on the superior intellect of rising genius—they have not succeeded in attracting the more thoughtful part of young Oxford. Mr. Paul Rondelet speedily found out that it was one sign of superiority to speak of them with a contemptuous pity: not the lofty scorn with which the remnant of the Evangelical party, which have no Art and care little about Culture, are spoken of, but still with a pity which has in it a strong element of contempt. He therefore passed through the stages of scoffer, in which stage none but coarse-minded persons remain; of sneerer—to shine as a sneerer very peculiar and most disagreeable gifts are specially required; of Comtist, with whom some find rest and solace for the soul; of Know-nothing—these are a most attractive set of despairing young men; and of New Pagans.

Everybody knows that Mr. Paul Rondelet was one of the leaders in New Paganism. He called himself, sadly, an Agnostic, but he was in reality a New Pagan. Agnosticism is a cloak which may wrap all kinds of disciples. Go ask the *Nineteenth Century*, or the *Contemporary*, or even the poor old laggard, the *Fortnightly*, to define an Agnostic.

He was an Agnostic by profession, and he spoke sadly of Infinite Silences, as if he was their original discoverer. But, in reality, he was a New Pagan. It was, indeed, a delightful thing to sit with the select few, the profane vulgar not being admitted, to feel that one possessed the real secret of the Dionysiac myth; to bring to one's bosom the whole truth about Demeter; to know, in a manner only understood by priests and the initiated of old, the divine Aphrodite and the many-breasted Diana; to recognise, almost in secret conclave, that all these, with Isis and Horus, Samson, and many others, meant nothing but the worship of the Sun and the Year in its seasons: so that, to those who rightly read the myths, all religion means nothing but the worship of summer and winter, the awaking and the sleep of life, so that there is really no reason at all, according to the New Pagan, why we should not return to the kindly, genial, and beneficent old Gods.

The Modern Prig, if he is of the advanced order, belongs, as a matter of course, to some such school. He gets, that is, as far to the front as he can. He adopts the newest vague Gospel, and holds it, for the time, with the tenacity of a martyr clinging to his creed. And he poses, having pride in the situation, as I fear many an early martyr did. For the essential and leading characteristic of the Prig is that he believes himself in advance of his age, and very, very far in advance of his father and grandfathers. But nothing certain, nothing dogmatic. Therefore Mr. Paul Rondelet had trained himself not only to look with a tolerant contempt, because some form of religion is good for common people, on the reverent crowds pouring in and out of the sanctuaries, but also to regard with scorn the blatant prophets of Atheism who bawl their intolerance on Sundays across the wilds of Hampstead Heath and Clapham Common. This naturally led among all the members of his set to their looking upon one who, being actually an Oxford man—had he been of Cambridge it would have been more possible, but equally degrading—had taken upon him Holy Orders with a bitterness of loathing and wonder which surpassed everything. It was, therefore, a situation full of irony that he should find himself compelled to become that hated thing, a clerical Fellow, or to lose, at one fell swoop, the whole of his income.

In three months his fellowship would come to an end. He felt like Dr. Faustus when he was approaching the last few days of his last year. Worse than any devil to Mr. Paul Rondelet was the Red Spectre of Poverty.

And to his school some kind of magnificence in living is absolutely essential.

That was easily obtained at Oxford, where, as a fellow, he had rooms and other allowances. But out of it, away from those monastic groves, where was he to find the necessary belongings of the Higher Life ?

There was an ignominy, too, about pecuniary difficulties. He had always talked of money as if he had no necessity of thinking about it, ignoring the exiguity of the paternal income ; he had set a tone of contempt for money to two generations at least of undergraduates ; he had steadily maintained that Art, of all kinds, was to be pursued for the sake of Art alone, and for no advantages of lucre which might follow the successful practice of Art ; he had taught his disciples to contemplate serenely, like the disembodied Cicero, the struggles and rivalries of the lower classes. And after this, it would be his lot—ah ! hard and thankless lot—to go down into the labour market with the rest, like a rustic at a statute fair, and wait to be asked what he could do and for what wage he would be hired.

What, indeed, could he do ?

In reality the class of young men to which Mr. Paul Rondelet belonged possess a marketable value quite out of all proportion to their own opinion. They read, as I have said, all the reviews, particularly those written in the newest jargon. They criticise scornfully, from the loftiest platform, productions of the day written by men who toil and give their best, mindful as much of their audience as of their Art. Fortunately these lofty criticisms do not often get into print, for the class of Editors who love Prigs is very small. And when they essay to write, those friends of their set receive with amazement and disappointment the first-fruits, which ought to be the brightest and best, of a genius which they have revered. Alas! the looked-for result turns out to be common thought wrapped in pretentious jargon, and, amid the boastful trappings of pretence, they discern with difficulty a vein so slender that hardly it can be seen to glitter in the brightest sunshine. Vast, indeed, is the difference between performance and promise.

What had Paul Rondelet to offer?

There was in his desk a little portfolio full of manuscript poems—they looked very pretty, written in his small, clear, and carefully eccentric handwriting on the thick cream note-paper which he affected. He and his friends believed that they had in them the true ring of original genius. Would they sell, if they were bound up? He was fain to reply that they would not. It required an education to admire them, and the world was not yet ripe for such superior work. Among these was one, in especial, very dear to himself and his friends, called *Aspasia's Apology*. It was a sort of sequel or companion to a certain well-known and charming London lyric by Mr. Rossetti, and was even more realistic than the work of that master. Then there were a few sonnets which, though he loved to read them and his friends cuddled them, would, he felt, require so much toning down that their distinctive excellencies would be lost; and there were some odes whose severe classicalism limited their popularity to a very small set. On the whole, the probable value of his copyright in these poems was small.

But he might write articles in the more advanced of the magazines. He had once—he remembered with what pains and labour—written an article for the *Contemporary*, which the editor had declined with thanks, and yet it was clothed in the very finest new English, quite equal to Mr. Pater in his highest flights, and expressed the innermost convictions of his school. He swore then that he would never write again, unless for an audience who should invite him in terms of abject request. He would wait till the whole world should thrill and yearn for his coming.

He might teach, take pupils, give lectures. But that meant self-assertion, bawling in the market-place, joining in the struggle of competition. How *could* he, Paul Rondelet, stoop to assert what everybody ought to know, that he was the greatest of modern teachers, the noblest and best of philosophic lecturers?

Would they give him something in the Government service? A Poor Law Commissionership, a Permanent Under Secretaryship, a Commissionership in Lunacy, any little thing of that sort would do, just to provide the necessaries of life, which include, of course, a modicum of fair claret. But how to get such a post? We are not yet arrived at that consummation of sound political economy when our rulers shall all be philosophers, and anxious only to appoint philosophers; we are as yet still in the gloomy stage of interest, influence, favouritism. It is still possible for men like Mr. Paul Rondelet to stay out in the cold. And Mr. Paul Rondelet possessed absolutely no interest at all.

He who works for pay is a servant. He who has no money must work for pay. Therefore Mr. Paul Rondelet was condemned to be a servant. And he had aspired in his foolish dream to independence.

And again, he was in debt. The burden of debt is generally borne by Oxford men with great composure. Some there are, who like Panurge, argue in favour of debt as a healthy condition of life: I will not repeat their arguments, which are indeed somewhat threadbare by this time. The only argument worth quoting is that which asserts that without the stimulus of debt, the lazy man remaineth lazy. In Mr. Rondelet's case, debt was no stimulus at all, but only an irritant. This morning he had received, for instance, two or three most disagreeable letters from ungrateful people, whom he had long honoured with his custom, asking for money. Money indeed! And his fellowship to expire in three months.

These sad thoughts occurred to him after luncheon. The rest of the Monks and Sisters having gone about their monkish devices, he retired to the library with these missives, to think. He thought the thing over from every possible point of view.

And at last an inspiration came to him. The method of the House of Hapsburg. *Tu, felix Austria, nube.*

He could no longer remain in the dark library; he must think this over in the open. He sought the solitude of the mediæval garden, and sat down to see what he might make of this new thought.

It was better than writing for papers and magazines; better than painfully elaborating books—better than lecturing; better than anything. In the home of some woman—wealthy, young, beautiful, not insensible to the charms of the Higher Culture, open to ideas, willing to be led rather than wishing to lead, with a proper respect for one who had taken a First in History Schools—could such a woman be found, he might find shelter from the strife of humanity; might even forget that he was allied with that struggling and eager band at all. Could such a woman be found? She was found: she was here; she was in his presence; she was walking in the garden; she was coming to meet him. Her name was Miranda Dalmeny. He sprang to his feet and felt as if he could hold out his arms to meet her, even as Adam met his blushing Eve. Ever since the news of Alan Dunlop's engagement, this idea had been floating vaguely through the mind of Mr. Rondelet. Now it assumed, all at once, the character of a resolution. He *would* marry the owner of Dalmeny Hall. Alan was out of the way; there was no other rival; he would secure this heiress for himself.

Now Miranda was not an admirer of this Fellow of Lothian. On the contrary, she thought him conceited and did not like his airs.

"He will not join in our amusements," she said to Desdemona with a little bitterness. "It must be a great misfortune to be superior to the ordinary pleasures of mankind. He certainly neither sings nor dances, nor acts, nor talks well. All is sadness with him, as if with sorrow over one painful deficiency in Culture."

"It is the new manner, my dear," said Desdemona. "Just as some men about town affect to be *blasé* and worn out—fancy Lord Alwyne pretending to be worn out!—so the highly superior school affect to be governed by so lofty a standard of criticism as to be incapable of finding amusement or pleasure in any of the ordinary things. I do not like Mr. Rondelet. Rightly did we call him Brother Parolles — words, words, words."

"They must spoil the world a good deal for themselves," said Miranda. "On that account they are very greatly to be pitied."

"Yes," replied the lady of experience. "They want men made for themselves; they want women made for themselves; they want to be appreciated at their own estimate of themselves, and they do *not* want to be asked to do anything to justify that estimate."

But Mr. Rondelet did not know of this conversation.

Miranda greeted him with her quiet smile, and sat beside him on the garden bench, which was by this time of the afternoon well within the shade of the great walnut-tree.

"I have been to-day to see Alan Dunlop's *fiancée*," she said. "Have you seen her?"

"Once." Mr. Rondelet shuddered. "She was shelling green peas in the porch, and I saw her deliberately eating a raw pod. Could one marry a person who is capable of eating raw pods?"

Miranda laughed.

"Your delicacy," she said, "springs from ignorance. I believe the shells of green peas are sweet. Surely you used to think so when you were a boy."

"Ah!" sighed Mr. Rondelet; "I have made it my constant endeavour, since I went up to Oxford, to forget *all* that one used to do or think as a boy. It would be terrible, indeed, to be forced to remember the dreadful things that one did in that stage of existence."

"Really! Was your boyhood, do you think, more—more repulsive than most?"

"No; not that." Mr. Rondelet shook his head. "Not that. Less so, I should think, because even at the tenderest age one had gleams and glimpses of better things. And one remembers despising other boys for their rough savage ways and clinging to the lower forms of life."

"Do you mean that when you sucked sweeties you dreamed of fine claret?"

This was the question by way of metaphor which Mr. Rondelet hardly expected.

"Scarcely," he murmured. "The imaginings of a boy take no concrete forms. Only one yearns from the very first after the Golden Age, which seems then so possible, and now so far off. What I mean is—Miss Dalmeny, I am sure *you* will understand me. I have watched for a long time the fine genius of appreciative sympathy latent in your brain—what I mean is, that children of finer clay than their compeers are touched very early in life with that divine discontent which marks the soul of the Higher Culture."

"Really!" said Miranda. "You interest me, Mr. Rondelet. Do you say—a divine discontent?"

"Yes. All discontent is divine. Even that which leads to ambitious aims and elevates the grocer's son, by means of the Church, to the Episcopal Bench. That, too, which fires the blood of the rustic and impels him—it is a reminiscence of the great Aryan wave of emigration—to move westward; that which prompts the student to an examination of the things that are, and that which leads the scholar to despair of the things that are to be."

I believe he was quoting something he had read and remembered, but he said it slowly, as if it was his own.

"And you, Mr. Rondelet, despair of the—the things that are to be?"

"Not openly. Pray do not quote me. The Common Room of Lothian has not yet pronounced all its views. We have resolved in silence upon many important topics. I should be doing, perhaps, incalculable mischief if I were prematurely to disclose to the world the views of the Lothian Common Room."

Miranda was staggered by so much modesty. Did he really believe that the world cared one farthing for the views of the Common Room of Lothian? He did; he really did.

"When one lives," he went on to say, his long fingers playing sadly over his smooth cheek, "in the centre of the Higher Thought, one is apt to forget how misapprehension may be wrought by a premature statement. The world waits for Oxford to speak. Oxford waits for Lothian."

He stopped short, as if for Miranda herself to complete the speech, by saying: "And Lothian waits for Rondelet."

Again Miranda was staggered. It was almost too much to think that she was actually conversing with one on whose utterances the world waited.

"You used to be a friend of Alan Dunlop's," she went on, after a pause, "when he was an undergraduate?"

"Yes." His finger went back to his cheek, while with the other hand he stuck into his eye the glass which *would* not remain there. "Yes, we were friends. Dunlop was a man of considerable insight, up to a certain point. Then he would go off in the direction of practical sociology. I, with a few others, remained faithful followers of our theory, and continued to work it out to its logical conclusions, so that we have now advanced to a point where as yet, I believe, we have—there are only two or three of us—no disciples at all. We stand on a level by ourselves. Alan is left far, very far behind us: we only may speak boldly to each other what from others we would fain hide."

Again the measured sentence seemed a quotation.

"That must be a very great thing," said Miranda, wondering what their new levels were like, with just a suspicion that they had something heretical to do with marriage, religion, philanthropy, and other good things.

"I can hardly," the Philosopher continued, "explain to you the conclusions—not theories, but irrefragable conclusions—of the newest school of Modern Philosophy. Suffice it to say, that as the religions of the world have all been proved to have been based on false historical foundations, so its social economy, resting on the family, as the basis, is fatally unsound, and must, as a preliminary step, be entirely remodelled."

"Oh!" said Miranda, wondering whether this sort of talk was quite proper, "and Alan does not agree with you?"

"He did not follow us so far. He has probably never considered our present position. We—the more advanced set—chanced, after he left us, to discover that our previous maxims, many of them similar to those of the well-known philanthropic school, had to be reconsidered and finally abandoned. Alan, poor fellow, remains in the mire of philanthropy. We, on the higher levels, have arrived at the grand Law that the more desirable life is the life *per se*, the life of example to those who know how to read it, but of unconscious example: the life in which Art and Culture have the chief—nay, the sole place; and in which the herd, the vulgar, low-bred, and offensive herd, are left to swill as swine, tended by each other, just as they please. If they choose to raise their eyes, they may see walking before them in sweetness and light the great examples of the age——"

"Yourselves?"

"Ourselves; always, you see, before their eyes. As for the ignorant and the vulgar, we let them alone. That is best for them. We neither help them, nor look at them, nor care about them. Those among them who are worthy will rise; those who are not will remain where they are, grovelling and wallowing in their sties like pigs. Do you not pity poor Alan Dunlop, Miss Dalmeny?"

"I think I do, indeed," she replied; but her thoughts were not his.

Then she lifted her head quickly.

"That is a strange view of life, Mr. Rondelet. I think I hardly follow you quite. Is it not selfish—rather selfish?"

"Quite selfish," he replied, delighted, and with a little flourish of the long fingers about either side of his face. "Quite, quite selfish. That is the secret of the new Morals. That is what we desire to teach—the new virtue of Pure Selfishness. Every man must find out the Higher Life and live it, regardless of others, all to himself."

"All to himself," she murmured.

"Nay, not quite all," Mr. Rondelet interposed, with a little blush which became him mightily, and made him for a moment look like one of the vulgar herd. "Not quite all. The perfect man lives with and for the perfect woman."

"Oh!" said Miranda, "I began to think you were more than human."

At this point, Miranda, detecting a tendency on the part of Mr. Rondelet's left hand to leave his cheek, over the smooth surface of which his long white fingers had been delicately wandering, and move downwards in the direction of her own hand, got up from the garden-bench and began to walk across the grass. He rose and followed her.

"Indeed," he said, "that is not so. We aim at being more perfectly human than the rest. Our lives should be two-fold—it is, of course, an absurdity to speak of married people being one. The only difficulty with us"—here he sighed and became plaintive—"is that of finding the fittest mate."

"That, indeed," said Miranda, "would be difficult. For, suppose you found the fittest mate, how would you persuade her that you really belonged—for I suppose she would have to be as selfish as yourselves—that you really belonged to your high levels. Of course you would not expect in a purely selfish person anything like faith or imagination. I am afraid you would have to descend a little from your height."

"By conversation——" he began.

"Talk is deceptive. I think you must first do something. You would have to demonstrate your superiority by writing, preaching, or teaching. Till then, Mr. Rondelet,"—she sprang quickly up the steps which led to the terrace,—"till then I fear your life will be one of lonely and unappreciated Selfishness."

She left him alone in the garden.

He was only half-satisfied with the conversation. To be sure, he had unfolded something of the new philosophy and allowed Miranda to guess at something of his purpose, but her manner of using the word Selfish lacked reverence. She spoke of Selfishness after the manner of the common herd. That was disheartening. On the other hand, she did give him advice, which always means taking a certain amount of interest. She advised him to do something.

Why not? He would write a paper which should at one stroke make him famous: he would write on the wretchedness of living at all under the conditions by which life is surrounded: he would show that life, with special reservations for men of his own school, is not worth having at all.

His imagination seized hold of the topic, he fancied Miranda reading it aloud, he fancied all the papers quoting it, he fancied the undergraduates looking at him as he walked down the High, he fancied the paper crammed with the deepest thought, wrapped in the most scholarly language, and flashing with epigram. Then he went hastily, his brain afire, to look at the magazines, and choose the one most suited for his article. Cruel mockery of Fate! It was already done in the *Nineteenth Century!*

CHAPTER XXIX.

"Or I am mad, or else this is a dream."

MRS. BOSTOCK continued to take the same gloomy view of Alma's wonderful fortune. Instead of rejoicing with her husband, and holding up her head as she did, she went about downcast and murmuring, instead of thanking Heaven. She said it was unnatural; she laughed to scorn her daughter's earnest efforts to make herself a lady; she even went so far as to declare that it was a flying in the face of Providence.

There is only one manner of meeting with opposition possible to men whose powers of utterance are not equal to their powers of indignation. Everybody knows that method : most women have experienced its force, and can testify to the remarkable lack of results which follows its exhibition. What one "damn," in fact, cannot effect, fifty cannot. Yet a certain artistic pride in rising to the occasion carries on the swearer. But even after the greatest provocation, followed by the most extraordinary efforts, you always feel, as a merchant skipper once complained to me with tears in his eyes, after swearing till the topmasts trembled, that you have hardly done justice to the subject. The Bailiff did his best, poor man ; and yet his wife remained obdurate.

No one sympathised with her, except, perhaps, Miranda, to whom she poured out her soul.

"How should the girl be fit," asked her mother, "to be a gentleman's wife ? It isn't from her father that she'd learn the soft ways that Master Alan had been used to, that's quite certain. Then he'll turn round some day and blame me for it —me, his mother's own maid, as held him in my arms before he was a day old !"

"But Alma looks soft and gentle," said Miranda ; "and I am quite sure that Alan would never impute any blame to you."

Mrs. Bostock spread out her hands and nodded her head.

"Soft and gentle ?" she echoed. "Miss Miranda, a cat is soft and gentle ; but a cat has got a temper. Only a cat has manners ; which," she added, after a pause, "my daughter hasn't got."

"Bostock," she went on, "thinks it will be a fine thing for him. So it will, no doubt. Alma thinks it will be a fine thing to sham grand lady. Well, until she tires of it, no doubt it will be. Instead of learning her gratitude and duty to her husband —instead of trying to see how she can prevent being a shame and disgrace to him—she goes into the village and flaunts round, trying to make that blacksmith's girl burst with spite, while her father goes to Athelston market and makes believe he's equal to the biggest farmer in the place."

This was a gloomy, but a true picture.

"And no taste in dress," the ex-lady's maid went on. "Anything that's got a colour in it : here a bit of red, and there a bit of yellow. It makes me ashamed, I declare, Miss Miranda ; just to see you in that lovely pearl-grey, so cool and sweet this hot morning, is a rest for weary eyes. There ! you always had, next to my lady, the true eye for colour. That is born with a woman."

Then Miranda took the step which she had been meditating since the first news of the engagement. It was not a thing which gave her any pleasure ; quite the contrary. It gave her a great deal of pain ; it was a step which would keep before her eyes a subject on which she was compelled to think—Alan's engagement and his *fiancée!* In fact, she asked Mrs. Bostock to send Alma to Dalmeny Hall, to stay with herself until the wedding.

Mrs. Bostock hesitated.

"Would Mrs. Dalmeny like it?"

"My mother is almost entirely confined to her own room. Alma will see little or nothing of her."

"And the ladies of Weyland Court?"

"Alma will probably see none of them," said Miranda, smiling. "We shall not make her a Sister of our Monastery."

"It's more than kind of you, Miss Miranda, and I know it is all for Mr. Alan's sake. The banns are to be put up next Sunday, and her things to be got ready and all. But I can manage better without her, and up there with you she will be out of mischief, and learning nothing but what's good."

"Out of mischief, at least," said Miranda.

"Unless you're a lady, and can make your daughter a lady," said Mrs. Bostock, "it's a dreadful difficult thing to bring up a girl. Full of deceit they are, and cunning as no one would believe. Look as innocent, too, if you trust their looks, which I don't, nor wouldn't let one of them go out o' sight for five minutes. Even now, while I'm here, I shouldn't wonder if Alma isn't carrying on with—— But she shan't say I made mischief," concluded the good woman, as if her whole discourse had tended to the praise and honour of her daughter.

Alma was not "carrying on" with any one. She was harmlessly employed before the biggest looking-glass in the house, practising the art of walking as she had seen Miss Nelly walk, with her long skirts gathered up in the left hand, and a parasol in the right. She worked very hard at this imitation, and really succeeded in producing a fair caricature.

It must be acknowledged that, so far, Alma's only gratification in her engagement was this kind of exercise. Whatever else would happen to her, whatever "rows"—this young lady confidently expected rows—with her husband, whatever defiance or disobedience she would have to exhibit, one thing was quite certain, that she should be a lady. She would have her servants and her carriage; she would have as many dresses, and as fine, as she wished.

Her only gratification—worse than that, her only consolation! The prospect of actual marriage with that grave and solemn man, full of books and things beyond all comprehension, was becoming daily more repugnant. She was not a girl of strong will; she was afraid of her father, of Mr. Dunlop, and of Harry. She was afraid of all three, and she could not bear to think of the consequences which might follow whatever line she adopted. As for the grandeur of the thing, the poor girl was already *dés-*

illusionnée. Grandeur with perpetual company manners was not, she felt, worth the fuss people made about it. All very well to flaunt in the face of Black Bess, and the like of her; but a *gêne* when one is alone, or surrounded by those very wearying companions, stiff manners and incomprehensible talk.

Three weeks before the wedding. A good deal may be done in three weeks, did one only know the right thing to do. A clear run of three weeks, which she had hoped to use for some good purpose, to be devised by Harry, at home. And now she was to give up this precious interval of liberty, and spend it in learning company manners at Dalmeny Hall—company manners all day long, and no relaxation.

And she had begun, in her foolish and irrational jealousy, to hate Miss Dalmeny, whom, in former days, she had only envied. The young lady represented all that her betrothed regarded as perfect in womanhood. Can a girl be expected to fall in love with some one else's ideal—her engaged lover's ideal—of what she herself might be? It is not in human nature.

She dared not yet show her animosity. Once married, she thought, Miss Dalmeny should see of what a spirit she could be Only, when Alan talked of Miranda, she set her lips together and was silent; and when Miranda came to see her, she hung her pretty head and became sulky.

Miranda saw the feeling, and partly guessed its cause.

It was impossible for Alma to refuse an invitation at which Alan was rejoiced beyond measure, and her father gratified, because it seemed, to his amazing conceit, as if the whole world was ready to acknowledge the fitness of the match.

"My little gell," he said, rubbing his great red hands together, and assuming an expression of gratified vanity, which made Alma long to spring to her feet and box his ears for him—it is understood that young ladies with such fathers as Stephen Bostock accept the Fifth Commandment with a breadth of view which allows large deductions—"my little gell is to be received at Dalmeny Hall. She is not to walk there, if you please, nor is she to go in by the back way——"

"Like her mother," interposed Mrs. Bostock.

"She will be drove there by Miss Miranda herself," resumed her husband. "She will be bowed down before and scraped unto by the footmen, and the butler, and the coachman, and the lady's-maid. She will be made a lady before Mr. Alan makes her a lady."

"I wish being a lady wasn't all company manners," sighed Alma.

"Think of the grandeur!" said her father. "Think of setting alone on your own sofy at Weyland Court—because that's all nonsense what Mr. Alan talks—and receiving your father when he calls to see you. You will be grateful then to your father for being such a father, as it does a gell credit to take after."

Miranda drove her pony carriage to the farm to take her. She saw that the girl was unwilling to come, and she guessed, from the red spot in her cheeks and her lowering look, that there had been some difference of opinion between her and her mother. In fact, there had been a row royal, the details of which present nothing remarkable. The contention of Mrs. Bostock, had the matter been calmly argued, was that her daughter's disinclination to spend the three weeks before her wedding at Dalmeny Hall was another proof of her unfitness to rise to the greatness which was thrust upon her. Nothing but a natural love for low life and conversation, such as her father's, could account for her wish to refuse the invitation. Alma would have pleaded, had not temper got the better of reason, that he might have allowed her to enjoy in her own way the last three weeks of her liberty.

The controversy, warmly maintained on either side, was raging at its height when Miss Dalmeny's ponies were seen coming up the road from the village. Both disputants instantly became silent.

Very little was said when Alma left her home, and scant was the leave-taking she bestowed upon her parent. But her heart sank when the thought came upon her that she was leaving the old life altogether, never to come back to it, and that for the future it would be always company manners.

Mrs. Bostock watched the carriage drive away. She, too, felt a heart-sinking. Her daughter was gone.

"A son is a son till he marries a wife,
A daughter's a daughter all her life."

It was not so in her case. She knew that, lady or not, there would be a space between her and Alma more widening as she acquired new ideas, and began to understand how a lady thinks of things. And spite of her temper, her craft, and her subtlety, the good woman was fond of her daughter. Now Alma was gone, she would be left alone with her Stephen, and he with the thirst for brandy-and-water growing upon him. What difference did a little quarrel, however fierce, make for mother or daughter?

Alma preserved her silence and sulkiness during their short drive to Dalmeny Hall. It made her worse to observe that Black Bess was not in the village to watch her driving in state with Miss Dalmeny.

Miranda took her to her own room, a pretty little room, furnished with luxury to which the Bailiff's daughter was wholly unaccustomed. The aspect of the dainty white curtains, the pretty French bed, the sofa, the toilet-table, the great glass, took away her breath, but it did not take away her sulkiness. She reflected that all these pretty things meant company manners—why, oh! why, cannot people have nice things, and yet live anyhow?—and she hardened her heart.

"This is your room, Alma," said Miranda. "I hope you will be happy with us."

Alma sat on the bed, and began to pull off her gloves, pulling at them with jerks.

"You don't really want me," she said slowly, glancing furtively at her hostess, for she was dreadfully afraid. "You don't really want me here at all. You only want to teach me manners. You want to improve me before I am married, that's all."

It was quite true, but not a thing which need be said openly.

"Come, Alma," said Miranda, kindly: "you are going to marry Alan. Is not that reason enough for our being friends?"

But Alma went on pouting and grumbling.

"That's all very well, and if I hadn't been going to marry Mr. Dunlop, of course you wouldn't have noticed me no more than the dirt beneath your feet. I know that. But it's all nonsense wanting to be friends. You think you can teach me how to behave so as he shan't be ashamed of me. Very well, then. I always thought, till I was engaged to a gentleman, that I knew as well as anybody. But I know now that I don't. Mr. Dunlop, he's always saying that there's nobody like you in all the world." Here Miranda blushed violently. "Why didn't he ask you to marry him, then, instead of me? I'm to imitate you if I can, he says. Then mother keeps nagging—says I'm not fit to sit at table with gentlefolks. It isn't my fault. Why did she not teach me? She ought, because she knows, though father doesn't."

"Manners," said Miranda, "are chiefly a matter of good feeling."

Here she was quite wrong. In my limited pilgrimage, I have met abundant examples of men possessing excellent hearts and the kindest dispositions, who seemed to regard a plate as a trough. I am not at present thinking of the *commis voyageurs* whom you meet at French country-town *tables-d'hôte*, because their hearts are not commonly considered to be in the most desirable place.

Then Miranda took Alma's red hand—it was shapely and small—in her own white fingers, and pressed it kindly.

"Come, my dear, we will improve each other."

They had luncheon together and alone. In the afternoon they sat in Miranda's cool morning-room, which looked upon the shady garden, and while the bees droned heavily outside among the flowers, and the light breeze rustled among the leaves, and the heavy scent of summer floated through the open windows, Miranda told the girl something—she did not trust herself to tell her all—of Alan's life.

"And so you see, my dear, his whole life, from the very first, as soon as he understood that he was born to wealth, has been an endeavour to find out how best to use that wealth, not for any personal advantage or glory, but for the good of others. And while other rich men have contented themselves with giving money, speaking on platforms, and leaving secretaries to do the work, he put his theories into practice, and has always worked himself instead of paying others to work. He has thought out the kind of life which he believes will be of the greatest benefit, and he has lived that life. I think, Alma, that there is no man living who has so much courage and strength of will as Alan."

"Yes," said Alma thoughtfully. "Father always did say that he was more cracked than any man he'd ever come across. And I suppose he is."

This was not quite Miranda's position, but she let it pass.

"To live among the people as one of themselves, to live as they live, to eat among them, sleep among them, and to show them how the higher life is possible even for the poorest, surely, Alma, that is a very noble thing to do."

Alma looked as if she should again like to quote her father, but would refrain. Those who dwell habitually among the lower sorts acquire an insight into the baser side of human nature which, perhaps, compensates for the accompanying incredulity as to noble or disinterested actions.

Alma did not quote Mr. Bostock, but she laughed, being on this subject as incredulous as Sarai.

"After all, what good has he done the villagers with his notions?" she asked.

"Who can tell?" replied Miranda. "You cannot sow the seed altogether in vain. Some good he must have done."

"He hasn't then," said Alma triumphantly. "Not one bit of good. If I wasn't afraid of him, I'd tell him so myself. You might, because you are not going to marry him, and have no call to be afraid."

Miranda shuddered. Was this girl, chosen on purpose to carry on Alan's schemes, going to begin by openly deriding them?

Alma lay back in her easy-chair—in spite of company manners, the chair was delicious—and went on with her criticism of Alan's doings.

"Stuff and rubbish it all is, and stuff and rubbish I've called it all along. There was the Village Parliament. When the beer stopped, that stopped. Not one single discussion was held there. Only the usual talk about pigs and beer—same as in the Spotted Lion. Then there was the shop, where everybody was to have little books, and put down what they bought, and have a profit in it at the end of the year. As if the people would take that trouble! And there was no credit, until the boys gave credit, contrary to orders. And then there was the Good Liquor Bar, where the beer was to be sold cheap, and the best. Why, they used to water the beer, those two boys, and unless they'd given credit, too, no one would have ever had a glass there. And you know how both the boys have run away with all the money, and Mr. Dunlop's found out that they kept a double set of books."

"Yes," said Miranda. "It is such a pity that dishonesty must be taken into account in every plan."

"All the village knew about it—at least, all the women. Then the men on father's farm got three shillings a week extra. That makes all the other men jealous. For do you think that the men took the money home to their wives? Not they, nor wouldn't if it had been thirty shillings. Spent it all. every drop, in beer."

She almost rose to the level of righteous indignation as she made these revelations.

"And the Library! That makes a nice place for Prudence Driver. She—and a nasty little cat she is—tried to get Mr. Dunlop to listen to her tales and gossip. Well, we shall see before long."

Miranda began to feel very uncomfortable indeed. The young lady was revealing the seamy side to her character.

"And the Baths! As if those beer-drinking louts ever wanted to wash. It's too ridiculous. Well, I hope Mr. Dunlop's had enough of his foolishness now. I'm afraid to tell him. But I hope you will, Miss Dalmeny."

"We will grant," said Miranda, with a feeling of hopelessness, because the girl could not even feel respect for Alan's self-sacrifice—"we will grant that some of the experiments have not been successful. You, however, Alma, are his last experiment. It depends upon yourself whether you will be successful."

"Oh! yes," sighed the girl wearily. "He's always talking, but I can't understand, and sometimes I listen and sometimes I don't. Said once he wanted to marry me in order to enter more fully into their minds. Their minds, indeed! As if that would help him. I always thought men married girls because they loved them—and never a word, not one single syllable about love. How would you like it, Miss Dalmeny?"

Miranda could not help it. The feeling was unworthy, but her heavy heart did lift a little at the thought that Alan had made no pretence of love to this girl.

"Then he lends me books. Books about all sorts of things. Books so stupid that you would think no one would ever be found to read them."

"But you do read them?"

"Oh! I pretend, you know. I tried to, first of all, but it was no use; and then, because I saw he liked it, I took to pretending."

This she confessed with the perfect confidence that among persons of her own sex such little deceptions are laudable when found expedient.

And so the truth was at last ascertained by Miranda. The girl, in spite of all Alan's preachings, which had fallen upon unlistening ears, was wholly unprepared for the life designed for her, and perfectly ignorant of her suitor's designs.

What was to be done? She was afraid to tell Alan, and she shrank from telling Alma. Then she sent a note to Desdemona, asking her to come to her help. Desdemona came to dinner, and after dinner—which Alma thought a most tedious and absurdly ceremonious affair—Miranda played and sang a little, while Desdemona talked to Alma.

She talked artfully, this craftiest of comedians. She congratulated Alma on her success of the Golden Apple, which she insinuated was the means by which her splendid subsequent success had been brought about. And when Alma, who found in her a person much more sympathetic than Miss Dalmeny, at once plunged into her private grievances at being deprived of the usual accompaniments of courting, Desdemona murmured in tones of real feeling, "Dear! dear me! how very sad! and how very strange!"

And then she added, as if the thing made Alan's coldness conspicuously disgraceful:

"And when, too, he is going to make you sacrifice yourself in that dreadful way!"

"What dreadful way?" asked Alma.

"Why, my dear child, after your marriage."

"After my marriage. What do you mean, Mrs. Fanshawe?"

"Why, my dear, what do you think you will do when you are married?"

Miranda heard the question, and went on playing softly.

"Why . . . live at Weyland Court, to be sure; and have carriages and servants, and be a lady."

"But that is not at all what you will do," said Desdemona. "Has not Alan told you?"

Alma's face grew white.

"You will never live at Weyland Court at all," said Desdemona, slowly and icily. "The Court will be let to other people. You will have no carriages and no servants: you will live in the village among the people: you will work as you do now: you will lead the same homely life that you have always led, only simpler: yet it will be necessary, for your husband's sake, that you make yourself a lady. It will be your lifelong business to show the villagers how a cottage woman may be a lady."

Alma gasped.

"Is this the meaning of all his talks that I never listened to?" She sprang to her feet and clasped her hands. "Oh! I am cheated—I am cheated! And why did he pick me out for such foolery?"

"Because," said Miranda, leaving the piano and looking her sternly in the face, "because Alan thinks that he has found a woman who will enter into his noble plans, and help him to carry them out. Because he trusts entirely in your loyalty and truth, Alma. And because he thinks that you, too, desire a life which shall be one of self-sacrifice, and yet most beautiful and holy for him and for you."

But Alma broke out into passionate crying and sobbing. She asked if this was to be the end of her fine engagement, that everybody was to laugh at her, that she was to be worse off than Black Bess, and her wedding only land her among the wash-tubs of the rustics. She was a practical young lady, and life in a cottage without a servant suggested wash-tubs as the prominent feature. And then, in an uncontrollable rage, she sprang to her feet, and cried:

"I might have had Harry Cardew, and he's a man, and not a milksop."

And then she sat down again in her chair, and sobbed again.

Presently she plucked up her spirits a little, left off crying, and stated calmly her intention of going to bed, to avoid being laughed at any more.

No opposition was made to this proposal, except a faintly deprecatory remark by Miranda, to the effect that they were very far from laughing at her.

When she was gone, the two ladies looked at each other.

"My dear Desdemona," said Miranda, "my heart is very heavy for poor Alan."

"He is not married yet," said Desdemona. Really, that was getting a formula of hers.

Miranda, presently, instead of going to her own room, sought Alma's. The poor girl had cried herself to sleep, and lay with her tear-stained cheek on her open hand—a picture for a painter. Alma in repose, Alma asleep, Alma motionless, was like a possible Greuze. You thought, as you looked at the parted lips and the closed eyes, what the face would be like when the lips were parted for a smile, and the eyes were dancing with delight or languid with love. But when the lips *were* parted for a smile, it was generally a giggle or a feminine sneer—when the eyes were dancing with delight, it was joy at another's misfortunes; and if they were ever soft and languid with love, it was not when they looked in the face of Alan Dunlop, but in that of Gamekeeper Harry. For Alma was all her fond mother painted her: a young lady of unpolished manners and low views of life.

Miranda set down her candle, and sat awhile looking at the girl who had robbed her of the one man she could ever love. It seemed cruel. He would not, and did not, pretend to love this village maiden: she made no pretence of any sort of affection for him. She didn't even regard him with respect. She thought him cracked. She did not understand, even now, what he wanted her for; there was not the smallest possibility that she would ever rise to understanding him. She was no helpmeet for him, and he, with his enthusiasm and simple loyalty, was no fit husband for her. But Miranda could do nothing.

Presently, the light awakened Alma, who sat up, startled, and seeing Miranda, began to cry again, partly because she was rather ashamed of her recent outbreak.

"My poor child," said Miranda, taking her hand and sitting down beside her; "I am so sorry. I thought you knew the whole of Alan's designs."

"I di—didn't listen," she said. "It all seemed so stupid, and oh! I did think I should be made a lady."

"So you will, Alma, if you choose to be a lady. No one could live with Alan Dunlop without becoming nobler and better. My dear, there is nothing to cry about. You will have the best husband in the world, and he will smooth your path for you. It will be your happy task to show the villagers the beauty of a modest life. Alma, you will be envied in the long run, far more than if you were going to Weyland Court to live in idleness. You will think of things in this way, won't you?"

"I'll try to," said Alma. "But, oh! he's cheated me."

Miranda stole away. "He" was no doubt Alan, and it was a bad omen of the future when she prefaced her promised meditations on the Higher Life with the observation that her guide and leader had cheated her.

Next day, Gamekeeper Harry received, by hand, two letters. This greatly astonished him, as he was not in the habit of maintaining a correspondence with any one. The first, written in a fine Italian hand which was difficult for the honest fellow to read, was given him by a footman in the Thelema livery. It was signed "Clairette Fanshawe"—I think I have already alluded distantly to the fact that Sister Desdemona's marriage having proved a failure, she had long since resumed her maiden name with the marriage prefix—and asked him simply to call upon the writer at the Abbey that same afternoon, if possible. He accepted the appointment by word of mouth with the footman.

The other letter was brought by a boy—in fact, the son of an under-gardener. He drew it from the inside of his cap, and gave it to Harry with a show of great secresy.

"Oh! Harry," the letter began. It was written in a hand which was legible, but yet not clerkly. "Oh! Harry—such a revelation as ;you little dream of! and what to do—with Mr. Dunlop on one side and Miss Miranda on another, both at me like printed books, and Mrs. Desdy Moner, as they call her, who was nothing but a painted actress and glories in it, with her scornful ways about my not going to Weyland Court after all. I don't know what to do nor where to turn. So if you can help me, and mean to, now's the time. And I'll try to be at the little gate at the end of the garden—that which Mr. Dunlop always uses, and it opens on the park—at nine o'clock; and do you be there, too, punctual. To think of living in the village alongside of Black Bess, and she to come out and laugh all day long, and me to go on slaving worse than at home.

"Your miserble true love,

"ALMA."

Said Gamekeeper Harry to Robert the boy: "You tell her, boy, that I've read the letter and I'll be there."

CHAPTER XXX.

"'Are you going to be a fool?' asked George.
"'Of course I am not going to be a fool,' answered the young woman."
TROLLOPE.

BEFORE six the next morning Alma awoke according to usual custom. It took her a few moments to remember everything, that she was in one of the rooms of Dalmeny Hall, the scene of last night, her tears and disappointment. But the knowledge came all too quickly, and she sprang from the bed and began to dress herself swiftly.

Then she sat down to the table, where the thoughtful Miranda had provided pens and paper, and dashed off the letter we know of already with the ease of a practised pen and the impetuosity of a war correspondent.

Then she recollected that it was only half an hour's walk to the village of Weyland across the park, that she could get there, see her father at his breakfast, lay the whole horrid truth before him, and be back again at the Hall before Miss Dalmeny came down. She slipped down the stairs as lightly as Godiva; the house was silent and shut up. The great front doors were locked and barred, and the shutters up, and the door which led into the garden was closed in the same manner. She made her way into one of the rooms—she did not know which—on the ground-floor, and managed with some difficulty to open the shutters. The window looked out upon the garden, and on the lawn was a boy whom she knew, an under-gardener's son, sweeping and tidying up.

"Robert!" she cried, in a loud whisper.

Robert looked up, and saw, to his amazement, Alma Bostock.

"Robert, I want to get out, and the doors are locked. Bring me a ladder, or the steps, or something."

The window was about eight feet from the ground. Robert brought her his short gardener's ladder, and the young lady, with much agility, proceeded to get out of the window and to descend. Seen from the outside, it looked like an elopement.

"Now, Robert," she said, "you go up the ladder and shut the window. They will think the shutters were left open by accident, and if anybody asks you about me, you didn't see me go out of the house, mind."

"I mind," said the boy, grinning.

"And, Robert," she went on, hesitating, "can I trust you, Robert?"

He grinned again.

"I want you to take a letter for me, to Harry Cardew. You know where to find him?"

"I know," said the boy.

"Then here is the letter. Let no one see you give it him. Hide it in the lining of your cap—so!—and I'll give you the very first shilling I get."

"I'll take it safe and quiet," said the boy, stoutly.

She sped down the garden, out by the garden gate, and ran as fast as she could across the dewy grass of the park. Nobody was there but the deer, who thought it a shame that they should be disturbed so early in the morning, and looked at her as indignantly as the natural benignity of their eyes enabled them, refusing entirely to get up and scamper away, as they would do later on.

Fortunately, there was no necessity to go through the village, so that she was seen by no one: and she reached the farm before her father—who in these days of fatness was growing late in his habits—had left the house on his early round. And she was so early, that it was yet an hour from their breakfast.

She rushed in, breathless and exhausted, with eager eyes, as if something dreadful had happened; so much so, that her mother was fain to sit down and gasp, and her father stayed his hand which was grasping his hat.

"Alma!"

"Yes, father," she replied with short gasps. "Yes, mother: well may you say 'Alma!' Oh! the things I've discovered. Oh! the plots and the conspiracies!"

The Bailiff turned very pale. Had anything happened, then? Was the match, on which, to him, everything depended, in danger? Had these plots anything to do with him?

"We've been nicely fooled, all of us. Oh! nicely fooled. And you, too, father," added Alma, "wise as you think yourself."

"Who's been a fooling of me?" asked Mr. Bostock, proceeding, in general terms familiar to his daughter, to state the certain fate of the one who made a fool of Stephen Bostock.

"Mr. Dunlop, and Miss Dalmeny with him. They're them that have fooled us all," cried Alma, breathless. "What do you think he wants to marry me for?"

"To make you his wife, I suppose," said her father. "That's what most men want, and a most uncommon stupid want it is."

"Ah!" his wife echoed, "for once you're right, Stephen."

"Then it isn't," said Alma; "and you're just wrong. He doesn't want to make me his wife a bit; that is, he won't make me a lady."

"Nobody ever thought he would, Alma," said her mother, staunch to her principles.

"He can't help it, Alma," said her father. "The wife of the Squire *must* be a lady: she's a lady by position. When a woman marries she takes the rank of her husband. When I married you"—he nodded to his wife, formerly lady's-maid—"you took my position."

It was one of the minor results of the new allowance that the Bailiff had taken to consider himself a man of high, and even dignified, social position.

"That was fine promotion," said his wife. "Go on, Alma."

"You don't understand—neither of you understand. I thought I was going to be Mrs. Dunlop in proper style up at the Court and all. Well, it seems he's been explaining to me ever since we were engaged what he meant. It isn't that a bit. But I've been that stupid, as I wouldn't understand one word he said, and the more he said, the less I understood. It was Miss Miranda who told me the truth last night. Ah! father, you and your fine plans indeed!"

"What the devil is it, then?"

It's this. I am not to go to the Court at all—I am never to go there. I'm to be kept hidden away down here in the village. I'm to live in a pigsty, like what Mr. Dunlop has lived in for a year. We're to have no servants—no nothing. I'm to do all the work all day long, and listen to him talking all the evening. Father, he'll drive me mad! What with the work and the talk, I shall go cracked!"

She shook her pretty head tragically, and sat down on one of the wooden kitchen chairs with a desperate sigh.

"But you will be married," said her father, thinking of himself. "You'll be married to the Squire. You can't well get over that. Mr. Dunlop will be my son-in-law."

"And no fine dresses, and no pony-carriages, and nothing grand at all! And I'm to make friends with all the women in the village, and show them how they ought to live; and I shall be as poor as any of them, because we shall live on five-and-twenty shillings a week. Mother, I'd rather come back home and work in the dairy again."

"So you shall," said her mother, "and welcome. I always said it was unnatural."

"You keep your oar out of it," Mr. Bostock observed to his wife, with firmness, "and let me think this out a bit."

He sat in his arm-chair, his stick between his legs, and thought it out for ten minutes.

"I remember now," he murmured, "the Squire did talk about setting examples and that sort of stuff. He's full of soft places, is the Squire."

Then he relapsed into hard thinking.

Meantime the mother looked blankly at her daughter. It was hard enough to realise that her lady's son could positively prefer her Alma to Miss Miranda. It was still harder to understand why he wanted her to live with him in a cottage after the manner of the rustics, in order to set an example. Did not Miss Miranda set an example to all the world of a beautiful young lady leading the most beautiful of lives! What else did he want?

"And what," the girl went on with choking voice—"what will Black Bess say? And what will Prudence Driver say?—the nasty, spiteful, little, twisted thing! And what will all of them say?"

"As for that," said Mrs. Bostock, "I suppose they will say just what they like. You can't tie tongues. It isn't that as I care about; nor it isn't that as your father thinks about."

"No," said Alma, who had taken the bit between her teeth altogether since her engagement, and now permitted herself to criticise her parents with the greatest freedom. "All you care about is to stop the wedding if you can. You think your own daughter is a disgrace to Mr. Dunlop. In all the story-books I ever read yet, I never heard of a mother spiting her own daughter. Step-mothers a-plenty, but never a real mother. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, mother."

Mrs. Bostock began what would have proved too long a speech for insertion in these pages, but she was interrupted by her daughter, who now turned with vehemence upon her father.

"And as for you," she cried, with such force that the thinker, who was resting his chin on the stick, having closed his eyes for greater abstraction, sprang erect in his chair, and gazed at her with open mouth—"as for you, what you care about is to call Mr. Alan your son-in-law, and squeeze all you can out of him. I'm to marry the man for you to get his money."

Mr. Bostock, recovering his self-possession, remarked that, as a general rule, sauce is the mother of sorrow, and cheek the parent of repentance; but that in this particular case his daughter's provocations being such as they were, he was prepared to overlook her breach of the Fifth Commandment, of which, when she fully understood a fond father's projects and counsel, she would repent upon her bended knees. That is, he said words to that effect in the Bostockian tongue. After which he relapsed into silence, and went on considering the situation.

It seems extraordinary that not one of these good people should before this have realised the true position of things. Alma, however, heard the truth from Alan's lips once, and once only, and then she was too confused to understand. Later on, when Alan repeated in general terms, again and again, his plan of life, the girl was not listening. Mrs. Bostock had never heard the truth at all. The Bailiff understood only—we must remember that he too, for private reasons, was confused on the first hearing of the statement—that Alan was going to give up actual farm-work. And this being the case, there seemed really no reason at all why he should not go back and live in his own great house.

And now Alma's greatness was to be shorn of all but barren honour. And what for himself? Mr. Bostock went on meditating.

"What's the good of being the Squire's wife," asked Alma, "if I'm to be his kitchen drudge as well? Thank you for nothing. I'll stay at home, and let him marry Black Bess if he likes. I won't marry him at all."

Then Mr. Bostock, having arrived at a definite conclusion, slowly untwisted his right leg, which he had twined round the left calf, raised himself in his chair, and gazed steadfastly and in silence on his daughter.

Then he rose, took hat and stick, and spoke.

"You'll take a little walk with me, Alma," he said.

Mrs. Bostock saw that the parental advice would be such as she would not approve, but it was no use for her to interfere, and she was silent.

Outside the house her father thus addressed Alma:

"The Squire is a-going to marry you, my gell. He will live, he says, down in the village, along with the farm-labourers, you and him together. Gar! in a cottage where you will do all the housework. He's mad enough to want that, and obstinate enough for anything. But there's one thing he has forgotten."

"What's that, father?"

"When he asked for you, I told him you took after your father. But I didn't tell him that my gell had got a temper of her own, like her father. She is not one to be put upon, nor is she one to be deprived of her rights."

"But I'm so afraid of him."

"Ta, ta! afraid of your husband, and you a Bostock? You'll sort him once you get the use of your tongue, free as you have been accustomed to have it in your humble 'ome. Lord! I see it all reeling out straight before me. First, the church, then the cottage; that may last a week, or a fortnight, according as you feel your way and get your freedom. Then, one morning, you sit down and fold your arms, and you says, 'Take me to Weyland Court,' you says; 'that's the place where I belong, and that's the place where I mean to go.' He begins to talk, you put on your bonnet, and you walk up to Weyland Court, willy-nilly, whether he comes or whether he stays behind, and you sit down there, and there you stay. You send for your old father, and he will come and back you up. Do you think he can drag you out of your own house? Not a bit of it."

"But he doesn't love me a bit, and he's head over ears with Miss Dalmeny."

"Love! Stuff and rubbish! Now, look here, Alma. Don't mix up foolishness. You've got to marry him. I can't afford to let the chance go. If you prefer the work'us, say so, and go there—you and your mother. Love! What's love, if you've got your carriage and pair? What's love, when you can walk up to the church a-Sundays with the folks scraping a-both sides? What's love, when you can have a new silk gownd every day? What's love, with no more trouble about money? Gar! you and your love!"

Alma had nothing to say to this.

"And now, my gell," resumed her father, "you just go straight back to the Hall, and you'll get there before breakfast, and go on as meek as a kitten with them all; and if they show their pride, remember that your time is coming. And your father's to give you away in the church, and to back you up when you do sit in your own house and laugh at 'em all. As for they lazy Monks, we'll soon send them about their business."

Thus dismissed, the girl walked slowly back to the Hall. What her father said was just. She might, by being bold at the right moment, assert herself, and reign at Weyland Court. On the other hand, she did not feel confidence in her own powers, and she was, besides, profoundly humiliated. She wanted revenge, and she did not comprehend, as her father saw, that her most efficacious revenge, as well as her wisest plan, would be to marry Alan first, and upset all his plans afterwards.

She got back before breakfast, and found Miranda in the garden. She told her hostess that she had run across the Park to see her mother.

After breakfast, she sat in Miranda's room, with one of Alan's selected books in her hand, and pretended to read.

As was this room, so she supposed, were all the rooms of Weyland Court. It would be pleasant to sit in such rooms, to roam from one to the other, to feel herself the mistress. Pleasant, that is, if Mr. Dunlop was not there too. Pleasant, if you could slip into the garden and meet Harry Cardew. And here her heart fell low, because, as she reflected, after she was married, she would never, never see Harry any more.

In her way—her shallow way—Alma was certainly in love with this man. He had taken her fancy: and to think of giving him up, and taking in his place the grave and solemn gentleman with the soft, cold manners, the deep and earnest eyes, whose very word fell upon her like a reproach! Then her heart hardened, and Weyland Court, with all its glories, seemed a poor return for life spent with such a man.

Presently, looking up from her book, into whose pages she was gazing while she worked out these problems, she saw that she was alone. Miranda had left her. Alma tossed the book away, and began impatiently to wander round the room. First she looked at herself in the mirrors, of which there were two; then she looked at the books and the pretty things on the tables; and then she went to the window and began to yawn. Did ladies do nothing all day but sit over books?

While she was still yawning, the door opened, and the lady they called Desdemona appeared. She was in walking-dress, having just come over from the Abbey, and as Alma looked at her, she felt as if she was at last looking into the face of a real friend.

Desdemona's face was capable of expressing every passion at will, but chiefly she excelled in conveying the emotion of sympathy. Her face this morning expressed sympathy in abundant measure. Sympathy beamed from the pose of her head—a little thrown back, because Alma was a little taller than herself, and a little thrown on one side—from the softened eyes, from the parted lips, and from the two hands, which were held out to greet the village maid. I have never seen any actress who equalled Desdemona in the expression of pure, friendly, womanly sympathy.

"Oh! my dear," she began, taking both Alma's hands and squeezing them softly, "my dear, I *was* so sorry for you last night, so very sorry. How I felt for your sad position. And to think that he never told you! And we knew it all the time. What a pity! Oh! dear, dear! what a pity!"

"Perhaps he told me, but I was not listening."

"Such a pity! It seems so very hard upon you. What is the good of marrying a rich man if you have to be a poor woman?"

"Why, that's just what I told mother this morning," said Alma eagerly.

"Yes, and to think, oh! to think"—Desdemona's manner beame sympathetic to the highest degree, and she almost wept with sympathy, and her voice trembled—"to think that you should *have* to listen to him, whatever he says, as soon as you are married!"

Alma groaned.

"And men—oh! my dear, I know them well—are so fastidious. You will have to do all the work of the house, make the beds, wash the linen, scrub the floors, scour the pots, cook the dinner, serve the breakfast and the tea, wash up the cups, and all: and he will expect the manner—I mean the appearance—and dress of a lady with it all. My poor dear! no lady could do it. It is not to be expected."

"Of course not," said Alma; "but you are the first person to find it out. Miss Dalmeny, I suppose, thinks it's as easy as easy."

"Miss Dalmeny does not know anything, my dear," said the perfidious Desdemona, with almost a gush of sympathy. "And then, in addition to all that, you will have to go about among the labourers' wives and make friends of them. That will be a very hard thing to do, for I am sure, my dear, such a pretty and well-mannered girl as yourself has never had much to do with that class of people."

"Indeed," said Alma, "I always despised the whole lot. Black Bess is no better than a labourer's daughter, and half a gipsy too."

"There it is, you see; that is the pity of it. And then you will have to read the books which your husband will choose for you, because when you are married, you will not be able to pretend any more to have read his selections. Really, my poor Alma, I pity you from my very soul."

Alma resented this a little.

"At all events," said Alma, "there will be lots to envy me, and think I'm a lucky girl."

"Those," said Desdemona gravely, "will be the people who do not know what we know. The worst of it is that Alan is so obstinate. Nothing, for instance, would ever persuade him to bring you up to Weyland Court. He is fixed upon the village life."

"But suppose," said Alma meaningly, "suppose that I were to go over there and say I was going to remain there."

This was rather a facer.

"My dear," said Desdemona, "after a pause of a few moments, "that would be impossible, because Weyland Court is let—to the Monks of Thelema."

Then Alma gave way altogether. Her father's scheme, then, was entirely unfeasible. She felt cold and faint.

"It will be quiet for you in the village. Dull, I am afraid. No amusements. Miranda says she will call upon you, but you cannot make yourself happy with an occasional call."

Alma turned white with jealousy—that meaningless jealousy of hers.

"You see," her motherly adviser went on, "I want you to know and understand everything. That is best, to begin with a right understanding, is it not? Well, you can never be to Alan Dunlop what Miranda has been to him. No one can. Had it not been for his philanthropic schemes, he would have certainly married her. She is, indeed, the one woman in the world who knows him thoroughly, and, under other circumstances, ought to be his wife. So, my poor dear, you will have to content yourself with the second place—or, perhaps, as he has many other friends in the Abbey, even with a much lower place in his affections. Of course, he will be personally kind to you. Gentlemen do not beat or swear at their wives."

"You mean," said Alma, her eyes glittering with suppressed fury, "that I am to be nothing in my own house, and that my husband is to think more of Miss Dalmeny than of his wife."

"Why, of course. We all know that. What can one expect, after his long friendship with Miranda? I suppose he has never even pretended to make love to you, my dear?"

"No," replied Alma, gloomily; "he never has. He is as cold as an icicle."

"He does not kiss you, I suppose, or say silly things to you, as other men do to their sweethearts?"

She shook her head.

"He has never kissed me. He isn't a bit like other men."

"Dear me! dear me!" sighed Desdemona. "What a dreadful thing to have such a sweetheart! As well have none. And you, too, a girl who knows how men fall in love." Desdemona added this meaningly, and Alma flushed a ruby red. "Did Harry Cardew ever leave you of an evening without a kiss?"

"What do you know about Harry Cardew?"

"Everything, my dear. And not only Harry, but gentlemen, too. Did not Mr. Caledon once meet you in the lane and offer to kiss you? Did Mr. Exton take you through the park that night when you won the Golden Apple, without the same ceremony? My dear, I am a witch; I know everything. You need not try to hide anything from me. I could tell you the past, and I can tell you the future. So you see, Mr. Dunlop does not love you, else he would kiss you, just as other gentlemen have done. Tell me, my dear child,"—here her voice grew persuasive, and she took the girl's hand in her own soft palm and stroked it—"tell me, do you *want* to marry him?"

"No," said Alma, "I don't. But I must—I must—cause of father."

"Let me look at the lines of your hand." Desdemona took the pretty little hand in hers, and began to examine it curiously. "I am a conjurer. I know all about palmistry. Um—um—um—this is a very strange hand."

"What is it?" cried Alma, superstitious, as other maidens be.

"Have you ever had your hand examined by gipsies?"

"Only once," said Alma, "and it was all nonsense."

"But this *is* not nonsense. Dear me! Really! The most curious thing!"

"Oh! do *tell* me," cried Alma.

"My dear, if it had not been for what has happened, you would think I was inventing. Now look at your own hand. What does that line mean across the middle?"

"I am sure I don't know."

"A marriage interrupted. And what does that line mean under the ball of the thumb? But, of course, you do not know. A long and happy life. And those lines round the third finger? Children and grandchildren. My dear, you will be a happy wife and a happy mother; and yet . . . and yet . . . I do not think it will be in the way you think. I wonder, now, if you have a pack of cards anywhere."

"I am sure I don't know."

"There ought to be," said Desdemona, looking about. Presently she opened the drawers of a Japanese cabinet. "Ah! here are some." Alma could hardly be expected to know that she had put them there, arranged for use, that very morning. "Let's see what the cards say."

Alma looked on breathlessly while the conjurer dealt, arranged, and laid her cards in rows, quite after the fashion approved among wise women.

"A brown man," she said, dropping out her sentences as if the cards called for them, "a man with curly hair: a man with rosy cheeks: a tall man: a young man: wedding bells and a wedding ring: a cross: this card looks like a father's anger: this . . . what is this? Your mother does not seem angry. A poor man, too, but riches in the background. My dear, can you explain it all to me?"

"It's Harry Cardew," said Alma, eagerly. "It can't be no one else."

"Is it now? You see, my dear, we cannot read names. We can only tell events. And what does all this mean, do you think? Cards *and* the lines on your hand cannot tell lies, either together or separately."

"I don't know. All I can say is, the banns are up."

"Yes; but there is many a slip, you know. And Harry?"

"Well . . . but you'll tell Miss Dalmeny."

"Indeed, I will not."

"Then I will try to meet Harry some evening, and ask him can he do anything? Because, whatever father says, I can't abide the thing, and I won't."

"You are right in one thing, my dear. Have a spirit and a will of your own. I always did say for my own part that a wife should be a man's one thought. Now, there's Miranda and Alan—there they are in the garden at this moment." Alma looked out, and saw them walking over the lawns in eager converse, and her little heart was like to burst with jealousy. "A pretty pair, are they not? After all, though, it would be a pity to spoil Alan's philanthropic aims, just because he's in love with Miranda.

Alma tossed her head.

"It isn't his philanthropy that I care for," she said; "not one straw. It's only father, who wants to get things for himself out of his son-in-law."

Here, however, the lady they called Desdemona broke off the conversation by sitting down to the piano and beginning a song, She had a sweet, strong contralto, and she knew how to enunciate her words, so that Alma understood them, and her heart began to glow within her.

For Desdemona began to sing a song of a faithful pair of lovers, who were to be separated by paternal decree and the maiden given to another; but that they ran away, like Keats's young lady, on the very eve of the wedding, and did not appear again until Holy Church had fairly made them one.

It was a beautiful song, and sung with the clear intonation which stage practice gives. Also, oddly enough, there was a personal application in the song to her own case, a thing she had never noticed in hymns, which were the kind of songs most familiar to her.

"How should you like, Alma," murmured the temptress, turning on the piano-stool, "how should you like to be carried away by your own true love?"

"Ah!" said Alma.

"What a splendid revenge!" cried the actress. She sprang from her feet and began to act. By what witchery, what enchantment, did the girl read in the face of the actress, in her gestures, in her eyes, the whole of a single scene? "A revenge indeed. Your father waiting in the church: your betrothed at the altar:"—her hands were spread out, her head erect, her eyes fixed, while Alma bent before her, mesmerised, unable to lift her gaze from Desdemona's face, with parted lips and heaving breast—"your bridesmaids wondering where you are: the clergyman with the book: the organist tired of playing: the people all wondering and waiting. Then—a sound of wheels . . . . it is the bride. How beautiful she looks!—almost as beautiful as you, Alma, my dear. But she is on the arm of another man. Heavens! it is the rival. The people press and crowd. The men whisper: the girls laugh and envy her: true love has won again. You can go, avaricious father—go—and count your gold." She acted all this with energy. "You can go, baffled suitor—you who looked to make your profit out of the bride you never loved—And you—all you who pray to see true love rewarded, come out with us and dance upon the village green. . . . What a scene! Can you not picture it? Oh! Alma, Alma, my beautiful Alma!"

It was a simple trap, but set with subtlety. Any less direct method would have roused Alma's suspicions. Now, however, the simple cottage girl, entranced by this bewildering picture, intoxicated by Desdemona's praises, overcome by so much sympathy and so much kindness, yielded herself a ready victim to the actress's blandishments, and fell into those fat and comfortable arms and on that ample bosom which lay open and invited the fond embrace.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"A tall and proper man."

It was with curiosity that Desdemona awaited the young gamekeeper, who had taken the fancy of this village girl. Doubtless, some clumsy rustic, half a step removed above the clods of the soil: some bashful, grinning swain, who might be drawn with his finger in his mouth, to convey a faithful impression of his character. Well, she saw a rustic certainly, and yet one of the most magnificent men she had ever looked upon, the comeliest, the straightest, and the strongest. His cheeks were ruddy like David's, his hair was curly like Absalom's, only he avoided that excessive length which led to Absalom's untimely end; his eye as keen as that of the last Mohican.

Desdemona rose out of respect to such splendid humanity. And then, to the honest young giant's amazement, she murmured, still looking at him:

"There be some women, Silvius, had they marked him
In parcels, as I did, would have gone near
To fall in love with him."

And she said aloud,

"Shake hands with me, Mr. Cardew; I think you are a very handsome man."

Harry bowed respectfully, but he did not accept the invitation to shake hands. And then Desdemona discovered that this handsome man was perfectly self-possessed and had perfect manners. Her experience of gamekeepers was naturally small, but her knowledge of human nature should have taught her that men who live alone in the woods, watching the habits of creatures, and whose work brings them into close contact with gentlemen, would be likely to acquire a fine manner.

Harry, then, bowed gravely when this lady told him he was handsome. He knew the fact already: he had experienced this kind of attack on his personal vanity more than once: but, though it is undoubtedly better to be good-looking than ugly, good looks will not keep off poachers, nor will staring at yourself in a glass keep down vermin. Harry was not altogether without imagination, but he devoted all his available play of fancy, all that was imaginative and unpractical in his composition, to Alma.

"I wanted to see you," said Desdemona, "about Alma Bostock."

"About Alma Bostock?"

"I have learned from Mr. Caledon, who knows you, I believe——"

Harry smiled. "Yes, madam, I know Mr. Tom very well. Almost as well as I know Mr. Alan."

"That you and Alma were, until her engagement with Mr. Dunlop, attached to each other."

"Yes, madam," said Harry, quietly; that is so. And we are attached still."

"And you hoped to marry her?"

"Surely," said Harry, "surely, we did think and hope so."

The quiet self-possession of this young man, and his modest way of answering, struck Desdemona with a little confusion.

"Pray do not consider me impertinent. I assure you that I am for many reasons most desirous of helping Alma in this matter."

"No one can help me. Nothing can be done now," said Harry. "Alma's going to marry Mr. Alan, and there's an end."

"And you? What will you do?"

"I shall emigrate," he replied. "I've saved a little money, and I shall go out to Canada."

Desdemona was silent for a while.

"Does Mr. Dunlop know?"

Harry shook his head.

"Unless Alma's told him, he can't know. Because there's only we two, and Mr. Tom Caledon, and now you, who know anything about it."

"Would it not do good to tell him?"

"I think not, madam," replied Harry, slowly. "I've turned that thought over in my mind all ways, day and night, to try and get at the right thing; and I've made up my mind that if Mr. Alan hears of it from any one except Alma herself, he'll be set against her, may be, for deceiving of him. Let things be."

"And you have decided to do nothing?"

"Nothing," he said. "There was hope while Alma was at home. I didn't know, but I used to think, when she came out to meet me in the orchard at night, when he was gone, that I should somehow try and find a way. And Mr. Tom, he came and talked it over with me; but the days went on, and I couldn't hit on any plan. And now, Miss Dalmeny has got her up at the Hall, and will show her the pleasant ways of living like a lady, and fill her head with notions, so as nothing can be done."

"I think that you are wrong; something may yet be done. Now, Mr. Cardew, what I want to make quite clear to you is that those who love Alma and those who love Mr. Alan—of whom I am sure you are one——"

"Yes," said Harry, "there's no one like Mr. Alan, except Mr. Tom, perhaps."

"All of us, then, have got to do what we can to prevent this marriage."

"But the banns are put up."

"That does not matter. For many reasons, I cannot ask Lord Alwyne, or Miss Dalmeny, or any of the ladies here, to do anything, but I have seen Mr. Caledon, and he will join me, and we will both work our best for you to break off the marriage, and you must give us your help."

Harry looked puzzled.

"You do not understand? Then let me explain something. Alma finds out at last what we have known all along, that Mr. Dunlop wants her to marry him solely in order to carry out certain plans and theories of his; that he means her not to live at Weyland Court at all, but in a little cottage among the farm labourers, as he himself has been living, and to work among them as he has worked. Stop"—for Harry was about to speak—"Mr. Dunlop, for his part, believes that she understands his views, that she will gladly follow in his steps, and help him with all her heart to enter into the minds of the villagers, understand them, and show them the real Christian life."

Here Harry laughed with derisive pity.

"Alma, for fear of her father, dares say nothing. Mr. Dunlop, who is, of course, entirely honourable, will keep his engagement, even if he finds out the truth about her. I need not tell you that the prospect before both is of the darkest and most unhappy kind—for Mr. Dunlop disappointment and humiliation; for Alma——"

Here she was silent.

"Yes," said Harry gravely; "I've seen it all along. For Alma it will be worse."

"Then let us prevent it."

Harry only looked incredulous. How to prevent a wedding of which the banns were already put up? The thing was not in nature.

"Will you let me tell you a little story?"

Desdemona told a little story.

It was a story of the same *genre* as that little scene which she acted for Alma. She acted this as well, but in a different way, for to Alma she was melodramatic, exaggerated, exuberant; but to this man of finer mould, she was concentrated, quiet, and intense. He was not externally carried away, as Alma. He did not lean forward with glistening eye and parted lips, but his cheek grew pale, and his lips trembled. Indeed, it was a story very much more to the purpose than any related by Mr. Barlow to Masters Sandford and Merton.

"And," said Desdemona, coming to an end, "it is not as if we were inviting you to join in a conspiracy against Mr. Dunlop's happiness, or against Alma's. Whatever is the result, so far as Mr. Dunlop is concerned, you will have prevented him from a step which would have ruined his future."

"It seems like a dream," said Harry.

"And, perhaps," continued Desdemona, "if those friends sc arrange matters as that this wedding does not take place, everybody who knows who those friends were would hold their tongues if necessary."

"Surely," said Harry, "that is the least they could do."

"Then we quite understand ourselves," Desdemona continued. "You will hold yourself in readiness to act some time within the next fortnight. Above all, secrecy."

"It seems like a dream," said Harry. "Mr. Dunlop, he'd never forgive me."

"Perhaps not," replied Desdemona; "and if he does not, there are other people in the world. You will not offend Lord Alwyne, I am sure, nor Mr. Tom, nor myself."

Harry stood musing for a little. Then he collected himself.

"I am to see her to-night," he said, "at the end of the garden of the Hall."

"By appointment?" asked Desdemona, a little taken aback—the artful little creature.

"Yes, madam, at her request. What am I to say to her?"

Desdemona could have wished him to tell Alma that she was a cunning and crafty little animal, thus beginning the very first day of her stay with a secret appointment. But she refrained.

"Tell her as little as you can. Only let her know that you alone will be able to stop the marriage, if she keeps quiet and tells no one. And go on meeting her. I will do all I can to make the meetings easier for her, and unsuspected by Miss Dalmeny. And now, my friend. good-bye. Shake hands, in token of confidence."

Harry bowed, and extended his brown fist with a blush which became him.

"I like you," said Desdemona, "and I will show my liking by giving you an old woman's advice. It is only useful for married men. My advice is no good for bachelors and selfish people like them. Do not, then, begin your married life by thinking your wife an angel. If you do, you will be disappointed. Remember that she is a woman, and though, perhaps, a good deal better than yourself, with a woman's vanities and weaknesses. Remember that. Also, don't humble yourself. Remember that if she has her points, you have yours. And what a woman likes is a husband who rules her; never forget that. She looks for guidance, and if you don't guide her, some other man may. And begin in your home-life as you mean to go on. And do not trust her blindly, because there are some women who go on better if they feel that they are running in harness, with an eye to watch, and a hand upon the rein. One thing more. Remember that all women, like all men, are most easily kept in good temper by praise administered with judgment. Shall you remember all this?"

"I will try," said Harry. "At all events, I see what you mean. Alma isn't a goddess, but I think I can make her into a good wife for me."

Desdemona sat down and considered carefully.

"It cannot be wrong," she thought. "Alan will be cleared of this entanglement. He will marry Miranda. Alma, the poor little shallow Alma, will marry the man who has fascinated her, and no one will be harmed—except, perhaps, that man himself. What a splendid man it is! And he may not be harmed. Alma is not up to his elbow in intellect and goodness; yet he is strong, and will rule. When a man can rule in his own house, very little harm comes to it. They will all bless and laud continually the name of Desdemona.

And then, her fancy wandering back, she sat for a long time thinking of the past, in which Alan's father was a good deal mixed up.

This was at three in the afternoon. Harry walked across the Park and inspected certain spots where he suspected wires, certain traps where he looked for stoats, killed two vipers, shot a kite, and took other steps in the gamekeeping interests. This brought him to five. Then he made his tea, which took longer in the making than in the drinking. Then he took a pipe, and considered with a certain elation, dashed with sorrow, the events of the day. Had his thoughts been written down, they might have taken some such shape as the following: "I am the servant of Mr. Alan, and I am going to take away Mr. Alan's wife that was to have been. But he took away mine that was to have been. And it would be a sin and a shame to let the wedding ever take place. Alma would be wretched, and Mr. Alan disappointed. When he can't marry Alma, he will go back to the young lady he always ought to have married—Miss Dalmeny.

"As for me, Mr. Alan will never forgive me. I shall lose my place, and that is worth a great deal more than I am ever likely to make off a small farm in Canada. But Lord Alwyne will be pleased. One would go a long way to please Lord Alwyne: and him our best friend always before Mr. Alan came of age. And Mr. Tom will be pleased. One would like to please Mr. Tom. I think that everybody will be pleased.

"Except Bostock. But Bostock has had a whole year's steady run with the Squire, cheating him at every turn, as all the world knows; he ought to be content. I suppose he expected to go on cheating all his life. No, Bostock, you are not going to be the Squire's father-in-law; and it will be worth—well, worth Mr. Alan's displeasure to see your rage, when you find the prize slipped out of your fingers, and yourself nothing but bailiff still, with the accounts to make up.

"And as for Alma . . . well . . . Alma is what the Lord made her . . . and if one is in love with Alma, why trouble one's head about Alma's little faults? The lady meant well, no doubt, and gave excellent advice, which if a man would always follow, he'd keep clear of many a pitfall. Poor little Alma!"

All this thinking brought him to half-past eight, and then, mindful of his assignation, he took his gun and strolled leisurely in the direction of the Park. It was half an hour's walk to the garden-gate where Alma was to meet him. Presently, at the point nearest to Weyland Court, there came slowly along in the twilight a pair, hand in hand.

They were Mr. Tom and Miss Nelly, and they looked sad.

Harry took off his hat respectfully.

"Well, Harry," said Tom, putting on a cheerful air, "what news?"

Nelly went on alone, trailing her parasol in the grass.

"I've seen Mrs. Fanshawe, sir—the lady they call Sister Desdemona."

"Yes—yes."

"And I've come to an understanding with her. I'm to depend on the help of friends, and take the word when the word is given to me."

"All right, Harry, all right. I shall not forget. Have you seen Alma lately?"

"Not since she came to Dalmeny Hall, sir."

This meant, not for four and twenty hours, and Harry hardly thought it necessary to explain that he was on his way to meet her.

"Have you talked it over with her yet?" Tom went on.

Harry shook his head. Just then Nelly turned back, and joined Tom again.

"Girls," he said, "are girls. That means, begging your pardon, Miss Despard, because I am not talking of ladies, that girls of our class like admiration and ease, and sitting by the fire, warm. Therefore, when Mr. Dunlop asked Alma, she thought at once that he admired her more than the young ladies of the Abbey. That turned her brain. And then she thought it was to be all sitting by the fire, with her feet on the fender. And that attracted her too. So that we can't altogether blame Alma, Mr. Tom."

Harry spoke wistfully, touched his hat, and went on his way.

Then Nelly, who had been hanging her head, burst into tears.

"Oh! Tom, every word comes home to me. *I* like to be chosen out of all the rest. *I* like to look forward to a life of ease and comfort, 'with my feet on the fender.' Oh! it's shameful—it's shameful! But how to get out of it. Pity me, Tom."

The "revelations" which Alma made to her lover were conveyed with the dramatic energy which characterises young women of the lower class all over the world, when narrating their wrongs. She was furious with everybody: with Miranda for telling her the truth—"She knew it all along, Harry, and was only laughing at me in her stand-off way:" with Alan, for not telling her before—he had told her dozens of times, only she was not listening: with her mother, for rejoicing that her daughter would not be stuck up for the derision of all as a fine lady: with her father, for not instantly declaring that the honour of the Bostocks demanded a breaking off of the alliance: with herself, for having been so fooled: and, above all, prospectively, with Black Bess, for the advantages which this new complication might give her. Nor was her anger appeased at all either by the very hearty kiss which her lover bestowed upon her by way of greeting, nor by that which followed the conclusion of her tirade.

She looked prettier as she stood there, worked up into a royal rage, than even on that night—to be sure Harry was not there—when she stood triumphant before the assembled multitude, bearing round her neck the chain of the Golden Apple. I do not think, now one tries to remember, that an irate Venus has ever been painted. She smiles, she sprawls, she laughs, she leers, she is Venus Victrix, Venus Triumphant, Venus the compeller of hearts, Venus followed by a troop of abject, grovelling men, but she is never, I believe, Venus in a royal rage. And yet, when one thinks of her uncongenial husband, worse for her than Alan Dunlop would be for Alma, one may be sure that there were moments in which her patience gave way, and she sought the relief of attitudes, gestures, and invectives such as one would fain see painted and written. Heavens! What a divine subject—Venus in a Rage! Methinks I see the heaving bosom, the parted lips, the bright and glorious eyes charged with the lightnings of scorn and wrath, the thunders of the brow, the tresses flying in disorder—it is a subject beyond the powers of mortal painter.

"And now, what's to do, Harry?" she asked.

She had exhibited a copiousness of language and a display of imaginative colouring to help out details, in themselves, perhaps, unpromising, which did her infinite credit; and now, her story told, she stood quivering still with her wrath.

"First," said Harry, "first, tell me true—you were proud that day when Mr. Alan asked you to marry him?"

"Yes," she replied, "I *was* proud. Wouldn't any girl be proud when the Squire come courting her? And Miss Miranda and all the beautiful young ladies at the Abbey after him in vain. Why, Harry, it wouldn't be in nature not to be proud, when all the others were made envious."

"And you didn't ask whether he was in love with you?"

"No, I didn't. He said something about it to begin with, but then—who knows what he says or what he means? If a man doesn't love a girl, what's the use of his marrying her?"

"And now you find he doesn't, and you know he wants you for his own experiments, you'd cry off if you could. Think careful what you say, Alma. More depends than you know."

"I would cry off," she replied, "and welcome, only for father. To live in a cottage, and do all the work myself, and have that man with his everlasting talk all day and all night about the house—why, it would be better to stay at home with father, and that's not too lively."

"Never mind father," Harry replied huskily, because this was a very important question which he was about to put; "never mind father. Look here, Alma—once for all—and make an end of it. Will you have me? No fooling this time."

"What do you mean, Harry?" There was a light of hope, if not of responsive love, in Alma's eyes. "Whatever do you mean?"

"I mean what I say. And this time you must mean what you say. Say No, and I'll go away and never trouble you nor yours no more. Say Yes, and we'll laugh at them all yet."

"But what do you mean, Harry?"

"What I say. Promise to marry me, and I'll manage it somehow. I shan't tell you what I'm doing. There shall be no chance of your letting out secrets. But I'll manage: I tell you I know how."

"Then, Harry," she said, firmly, "I'll say Yes, and joyful, if only to get rid of Squire Sobersides. And now, I suppose," she added, with a little natural jealousy, "he'll take and marry Miss Miranda. Then they can preach to each other, and much joy may they have."

Clearly Miss Bostock was as yet unfitted for the professed practice of the Higher Culture.

"And what are you going to do, Harry? Won't you tell your own Alma, as loves you true?"

By this time the fond gamekeeper had encircled the waist of this twice-betrothed nymph. But he was not to be wheedled.

"Never you mind what I'm doing. What you've got to do is just to sit at home, here, quiet. You wait patient, and say nothing till I give the word, and then you do exactly what I tell you, without letting out a word to anybody."

"And how will you send me word, Harry?"

"By a messenger," he replied mysteriously. "Never mind who that messenger is. He'll tell you. And you may know him, and you trust him, and do what he tells you."

This was romantic. This was a conspiracy. Alma felt the delicious excitement of a secret intrigue creep over her.

"But you've no time to lose, Harry. The banns were up last Sunday, only three weeks before the day."

"Plenty of time. Will you be patient and quiet, even if you don't hear from me till the very day before?"

She promised again.

"As for your father, we'll make him go round like a bubbling turkey-cock, and as red in the gills. And as for Mr. Dunlop—well—I'm sorry for Mr. Alan. But it's all for his own good," said Harry, cheering up. "He's like David, when he wanted to take away that single ewe lamb of his neighbour's, and the prophet came and prevented of him doing it."

As a gamekeeper, Harry's opportunities of going to church were limited, as everybody knows that Sunday morning is the gamekeeper's most busy and anxious time. This fact fully accounts for the curious mess he made of his Bible history.

"Did him good, that prophet," he repeated.

"Ah! but, Harry, Mr. Dunlop 'll never forgive you."

"Let him forgive or not, as he likes," said Harry. "We'll go to Canada. I'd as lief go there and farm my own bit o' land, as stay here watching for poachers and destroying of vermin."

"And what will they all say? Oh—h!" said Alma, with a long sigh of delight at the prospect of assisting in an adventure.

"Folks will talk," said Harry; "and they may talk about us, if they like, just the same as about other people. Good-night, my pretty. You do just what I say, and heart up."

CHAPTER XXXII.

"Think women love to match with men,
And not to live so like a saint."

It was a fact, this engagement, because the banns were put up in church, argued the people. Banns cannot lie. Bostock might very well lie; Alma herself might lie; but banns are not to be disputed. Therefore the country-side became convinced that the Squire of Weyland was really going to marry the Bailiff's daughter, an event as wonderful as that historic parallel of Islington, and the thing could be discussed as if it had already taken place. They knew not, they could not understand, these simple rustics, that the marriage was but a trap set by their Seigneur to catch the sunbeam of their hearts.

Had they known that fact they would have regarded the proceeding with the contempt which characterised the prevalent attitude of mind towards the Squire.

"He's not been that good to the village," said the young man they called William, to the cobbler of advanced thought, "as the village had a right to expect from the way he began. They suppers, now, they was good while they lasted—as much beer as you like, and all—why was they left off? And the Parliament, where we was to meet and talk, why was that left off?"

"Meanness," said the cobbler. "Because we wanted to defend our liberties. Ah! because we wouldn't be put upon with lies no longer; because some among us wanted to ask questions."

"And the Bar—what call had he to set up a tap?" asked William. "Who wanted his tap, when we'd got our own? And then made us buy it."

"Gave away the beer, too, at first," growled the cobbler. "They'd make slaves and chains of us all again, they would—him and his lot."

"P'r'aps he'll go back to the Court, now he's married, and let us bide by ourselves," said William. "We don't want no Bailiff's daughters along of us; nor no Squire's neither."

"P'r'aps he'll go on as he has a-been going on, corrupting the minds of them as has otherwise the will to 'read, mark, and inwardly digest,'" said the cobbler, thinking of the Atheistic publications which he had been unable to procure in the Library.

The Bailiff occupied a position so much higher than their own, that the engagement was not considered in the same light as by those who stood at Alan's end of the social ladder. Anything which was likely to remove this uncomfortable Squire from their midst was felt to be a relief. Is not that day the happiest in life when the schoolboy steps forth from the tutelage of masters? Would any one like to be always at work under surveillance? Why then expect it of the British peasant?

There was one face, however, which grew sadder daily, in thinking of the future—the face of Prudence Driver, the librarian. Alan's schemes might have failed, but he remained to her the best and noblest of men, while Alma Bostock continued to be the shallowest and vainest of women. This pale-faced little reader of books knew how to read the natures of men and women. Not wholly out of her books, but by mother wit, had she acquired this power. A man may read and read, and yet remain a fool. Many do.

Prudence knew Alma, and loved her not; she knew her antecedents; and she was certain that the girl would bring her prophet neither help nor sympathy nor encouragement. And, of course, she had long known that Alma disliked her, and would perhaps prejudice Mr. Dunlop against her. Alma might, even, Prudence shuddered to think, cause her to lose her pleasant place and its sixty pounds a year. In any case, no more evenings spent all alone with *him*, while he unfolded his plans and revealed the manner of life which he would fain see in his village. No more would the poor girl's heart glow and her pulse quicken while he spoke of culture and sweetness spreading through the labourers' cottages. All that beautiful dream should henceforth be an impossibility, because Alma would throw the cold water of indifference on the project.

"I would have," Alan said one night—it was the peroration of a long discourse which he delivered walking about the library, for the instruction of Prudence alone—"I would have the whole day of labour converted into one long poem—a procession of things and thoughts precious and beautiful. The labourer should be reminded at daybreak, as he went forth and watched the mists creep up the hillside, and the trees thereon bathed in the mysterious cloud and sunlight of Turner's landscapes—copies of which he would have studied in our picture-gallery; as he stepped along the way, the awaking of life, the twittering of the birds, the crowing of the cocks, should put into his head verses which had been taught him, sung to him, or recited to him at our public evenings. He would shout, then, in his joy. And he would watch the flowers by the wayside with a new and affectionate interest; he would beguile the way with examining the mosses, grasses, and wild vegetation of the hedge; his eyes would be trained for all kinds of observation; he would have a mind awakened to a sense of progress in everything, so that the old conservatism of the peasantry, with habit, the rooted enemy of progress, should be destroyed in him. He would no longer do the day's work as a machine, but as an intelligent artist, trying how it should be done most efficiently. And on his return, he would find a clean and bright cottage, a wife who would talk to him and for him. A meal cooked at our public kitchen, clean clothes washed at our public laundry, children taught at our public school, and nearly every evening something to do, to hear, to enjoy, which should break the monotony of the week. Music in every house; books, joy, and education, where there is now nothing but squalor, dirt, and beer. All these things I see before us, Prudence."

Prudence remembered every word.

What part of it would be achieved now, when he was about to clog his feet with an unsympathetic and indifferent wife? If things were hard to accomplish before, they would be tenfold as hard to accomplish in the future.

"Things hard to accomplish?"

Prudence reflected, with dismay, that as yet nothing had been accomplished at all, except the general feeling of discontent. The people did not want to be meddled with, and Mr. Dunlop appeared to them in the light of a mere meddler and a muddler.

Worse than all this, she saw, she and Miranda alone, that Alan was not happy.

In fact, during the three weeks of publishing the banns, Alan's face grew more sombre every day.

For he felt, though this was a thing he would not acknowledge even to himself, that his marriage would probably be a great mistake.

To feel in this way, even about an ordinary marriage, such a marriage as any couple might contract for their own solace, is indeed a melancholy way of entering upon the holy bond of matrimony; to feel in this way when, as in Alan's case, marriage is intended to advance some great end, is more than melancholy, it is almost desperate. His word was pledged; he was, therefore, bound to fulfil his part of the contract. And yet . . . and yet . . . it was the wrong woman; he knew it now, it was the wrong woman. Nor was there any other woman in the world with whom he could mate happily, save only Miranda.

When he found Alma alone in the pretty garden, among the rugged old apple-trees, it seemed to him, a dreamer as well as an enthusiast—to be sure, it is impossible to be the one without the other—that the future of things looked rosy and sunshiny. She smiled and nodded, if she did not answer, when he asked her questions. If she did not interrupt him by any questions of her own; if she never showed any impatience to begin her ministrations among the poor, but rather put off his own suggestion that her work in the village homes might be usefully set in hand at once; if she gave him no further insight, as yet, into the minds of the people than he already had—it was, he said to himself, because she was new and strange to the position; that she was as yet only a learner; that she was shy and nervous. He was ready to make all excuses for her—so long as she was at home in her own garden, pretty of her kind, a flower among the common flowers.

At Dalmeny Hall it was different. She sat beside Miranda, and it was like a wild rose beside a camellia, or a daisy beside a tulip, or a russet apple beside a peach. The face was common compared with Miranda's: her voice was strident compared with Miranda's, which was gentle without being too low; her eyes, bright and animated as they seemed at her own home, where there were no others to compare them with, looked shallow compared with those deep orbs of Miranda's, the windows of a brain full of knowledge and noble thought; her expression, in which could be read clearly, even by Alan, successive moods of shyness, boredom, and sullenness, pained and alarmed him. For what would the future be like, if these things were obvious in the present? and what should be done in the dry, if these things were done in the green?

Miranda did all she could to make the girl at home and at ease; yet every day saw Alma more sullen, more silent, more reserved with her. Perhaps Miranda would have succeeded better had not the custom grown up during this fortnight of Desdemona seeking Alma every day, and encouraging her to confide in her motherly bosom. This Alma did; she could not help herself; such sympathy was too attractive. At first she trembled, thinking that her confidences would be carried to Miss Dalmeny. But as nothing was carried, she grew more and more unreserved, and finally bared nearly the whole truth. Every day, she confessed, was more irksome to her up in this grand house. She grew tired of wandering about the garden; she was tired of walking about the rooms; she could not do work such as ladies do; she could not play; she took no interest in books or reading; she had nothing to talk about with Miss Dalmeny; she did not care one bit about the things Miss Dalmeny tried to interest her in—cottagers and their ways. And oh! the dreary evenings when Mr. Dunlop came, looking as if he was going to a funeral; and when he sat with her, or walked with her, talking, talking for ever, as if the more he talked the more likely she would be to understand what had gone before.

But not a word, as yet, to Desdemona of what she had promised Harry.

Then Desdemona, in her warm and sympathetic way, would croon over her, and pat her cheek, telling her how pretty she was, wondering why Alan was so blind to beauty, commiserating her afresh for the sorrows of her lot, and holding forth on the obstinacy of Mr. Dunlop, who, she said, had never been known to abandon a scheme or confess himself beaten, so that, even when he found that Alma was not fitted to be the cottagers' friend, guide, example, and model, as well as his own servant-of-all-work, he would go on to the end of his life, or of hers, which would probably not be a long life, with unrelenting tenacity of purpose.

Alma shuddered at the prospect; and then she thought of Harry and his promise.

"I'm not married yet," she said, after Desdemona had exhausted herself in drawing the gloomy terrors of her future.

"No, my dear," said Desdemona, "no; that is very true, and yet," she added, sorrowfully, "the banns have been put up twice, and there seems no escape for you. What a pity! what a pity! And you so pretty; and Harry Cardew such a handsome young fellow. You'd have made the handsomest couple ever seen. And Miss Dalmeny would have taken such a fancy to you, under any other circumstances. Of course you can't expect her to like you very much now, considering all things."

"No," said Alma, "of course I can't. No girls, not even ladies, like another girl for taking away their sweethearts, I suppose. But I wish mother would let me go home and stay there." She sighed drearily. Even the society of her father seemed more congenial than the frigid atmosphere of Dalmeny Hall.

"Better stay here, my dear," said Desdemona. "Do you know I keep thinking of that line in your hand—the interrupted marriage line; the long and happy wedded life; how can that be? And yet the hand never lies."

With such artful talk did this crafty lady corrupt Alma's simple mind. The girl fell into the trap like a silly wild bird. Fate, she said to herself, ordered her to follow Harry, when he should give the word.

For a fortnight no word came. Then on the Sunday of the third and last publication of the banns, Mr. Caledon met her in the gardens of the Hall. It was in the evening, and Mr. Dunlop was gone. She was thinking how much she should like to go to the garden-gate and find Harry waiting for her, when she heard a manly heel upon the gravel, and looked up, and in the twilight saw and knew Tom Caledon.

"I've got a message for you, Alma," he said. "I had to give it to you all alone, with no one in hearing."

"Is it—is it—from Harry?" she asked.

"Yes; it is from Harry. It is a very simple message; I met him to-day, and he asked me to tell you to keep up your heart. That is all."

"Thank you, Mr. Tom." The girl looked humbled. She had lost her old pride of carriage, being every moment made keenly conscious of her inferiority to Miss Dalmeny; and the intrigue in which she was engaged made her guilty and uneasy. Suppose, after all, that Harry should fail. And what did he mean to do?

Alan, for his part, was not without warnings of the future in store for him—warnings, that is, other than his secret misgivings and the pricks of conscience.

He had an anonymous correspondent; a person apparently of the opposite sex, though the writing was epicene in character, and might have belonged to a member of either sex.

Alan read these letters, which began to come to him, like many blessings, too late. Had he acted upon them, indeed, he would have had to stay the banns after the first putting up. He felt himself—it was not a feeling of undisguised pleasure—already married. The burden of his wife was upon him. He seemed to have found out, though as yet he did not put his discovery into words, that so far from being a helpmeet, she would become a hindrance; and that entrance into the minds of the people appeared to be as far off as the entrance into Hamath continued to be to the children of Israel.

And so the anonymous letters, some coming by post, and others pushed under the door by night, came upon him like a new scourge. Was it necessary, he thought, that he should know all the previous life of Alma—how she had flirted with this man, been kissed by that, been engaged to a gamekeeper of his own, and had walked through the woods at eve with a Brother of the Abbey? To be sure, none of the allegations amounted to very much; but when the mind is occupied and agitated these things sting. Again, he might have been foolish in entrusting too much power to a man of whom he only knew that he had been on the point of becoming bankrupt. But what good did it do him to be told that his bailiff was a common cheat and rogue; that he was going to marry the daughter of a man who rendered false accounts, bought cheap and sold dear, and entered the converse in his books; who was notoriously making a long purse out of his transactions for the farm; who was a byword and a proverb for dishonesty and cunning?

These things did no good, but quite the contrary. Alan read them all, cursed the writers, put the letters into the fire, and then brooded over the contents. He would not say anything about them, even to Miranda; an anonymous slanderer is always pretty safe from any kind of punishment; and yet it must be owned that anonymous slanders are grievous things to receive. Alan read them and remembered them.

And then little things recurred to him which he had heard before and forgotten or taken no heed of. He remembered meeting Alma one day, when he hardly knew who she was, walking in a coppice with Harry Cardew, his old friend and young gamekeeper. Alma blushed, and Alan, who was thinking about the grand march of the Higher Culture, just rashly concluded that here was another case of rushing into premature wedlock, and went on his way. Also he had heard Tom Caledon talking lightly of Alma's beauty, and thought nothing of it. And now those anonymous letters accused her of flirting with half-a-dozen men at once; he would marry a girl who had been kissed—the writer declared he had seen the deed perpetrated—by Tom Caledon, and presumedly by his gamekeeper and a dozen other young fellows. That was not a pleasant thing to read.

As for the letters, they were written by one person; he—or she—spelled imperfectly, and wrote a large and massive hand, covering a good deal of paper. The letters, like those of Junius, greatest and most detestable of slanderers, waxed in intensity as they proceeded, until the latest were models of invective and innuendo. The last which came to his hands was dated on the Sunday when the banns had been put up for the third time. It began with the following delicious *morceau*.

"Oh! you pore fool. To think that it's cum to this. You and Alma Bostock called at church for the third and last time, and after all I've told you. Can't you believe? Then send for Harry, send for Mr. Caledon, if he'll tell the terewth, which isn't likely, being a gentleman; send for Alma's mother, and ast them all, and see what they say. Is it for her looks? Why, she isn't a patch upon the blacksmith's daughter"—could the letter have been written by that young lady?—"not a patch upon her for good looks, and yet you never turned so much as a eye upon her. But you are that blind."

And then the letter proceeded in the usual strain of accusation and libel. Of course Alan was ashamed of reading these things; and still more ashamed of being annoyed by them. The philosopher, we know, would never be annoyed even by anonymous post-cards, which reflected upon the morals of his female relations and were read by the delighted inhabitants of his kitchen before he received them. The philosopher would rejoice, perhaps, at the thought that cook, housemaid, parlourmaid, and nursery-maid have read these libels, believe in them, will repeat them joyfully, and will exaggerate them.

Alan was probably not a philosopher, because the constant arrival of these letters did not make his countenance more cheerful when he went up to see Alma in the evening.

His gloom communicated itself to Miranda. She found it hard any longer to believe in a girl who could not cultivate enthusiasm for Alan. She was dejected and unhappy. She went little to the Abbey during these weeks; she lost interest in the place wherein she was wont to delight. Her cheek grew pale and her eyes heavy. She was kind to Alma, but she ceased her endeavours to interest her in the things which her husband would look for. Alma, for her part, became sullen and silent, restless in the house, and restless in the garden, where she walked for hours. She did not go again to the farm, and when her mother came, received her with a coldness which was worse than any of her ancient insubordination. Desdemona alone preserved a demeanour of cheerfulness even beyond that to which her friends were accustomed to see in her.

Therefore, during these three weeks when the banns were being published, and while the man and the woman about to take upon themselves indissoluble and lifelong vows should have been growing to know each other more and more, they were drifting apart. Alan was every day more sombre, colder, more of a schoolmaster, and less of a lover. Alma every day more silent, less prodigal of her smiles, more reserved, and—a thing patent to her *fiancé* and of very unpleasing omen—more sullen.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"There's nought in this bad world like sympathy;
  'Tis so becoming to the soul and face;
Sets to soft music the harmonious sigh,
  And robes sweet friendship in a Brussels lace."

MEANTIME, there seemed, to Desdemona's observant eyes, to be growing up in the Abbey a kind of restlessness. Unquiet betokens change. Was it, she asked, that the Monks and Sisters were tired of the Abbey or of each other? No; she made inquiries, and found that the general feeling was quite in the contrary direction. The place appeared to them still a most delightful haven. Yet there was a certain sadness prevalent. Could this melancholy be a contagious disorder taken from one or two afflicted members? Nelly, for instance, had obviously been pale of face and sad of aspect for some time past. She seemed to take a comparatively feeble interest in the matter of dress: she was known on more than one occasion to shut herself up alone in her own cell for hours; her delight in riding, dancing, talking, acting, singing, lawn-tennis, and all the pleasures in which she was once foremost, was no longer what it had been. Doubtless, in her case, the cause was in some way to be attributed to Tom Caledon. They must have quarrelled; otherwise, why did they avoid each other? Why did they look at each other guiltily, as people do who have a secret between them? To be sure, Desdemona could not know the nature of that admonition which Tom pronounced after the Court of Love. And that was all their secret.

As for Tom Caledon himself, he too was grown melancholy In these bad days he mooned—he who had been the most companionable of men, who had ever fled from the solitude of self as eagerly as any murderer of ancient story—he who was formerly never out of spirits, never tired of laughing with those who laughed, and singing, metaphorically, with those who sang, was grown as melancholy as Jaques in the Forest of Arden.

"Perhaps," said Desdemona—she was sitting in her own capacious cell, and Miranda was with her; Mr. Paul Rondelet was also with them—he was seen a good deal with Miranda during these days—"Perhaps, Miranda, the presence of two perpetually wet blankets, such as Tom and Nelly, has imperceptibly saddened our refectory and drawing-room. Blankets which *will* not dry, however long you hang them out, would sadden even the Laundry of Momus."

Paul Rondelet was leaning against the mantelshelf, a position which he affected because—he was no more free from personal vanity than yourself, my readers, although so advanced in thought—it showed to advantage his slender figure, and allowed the folds of the tightly-buttoned frock which he always wore to fall gracefully. He looked up languidly, and began to stroke his smooth cheek with great sadness, while he let fall from an overcharged soul the following utterance:

"Momus is the only one of the gods who is distinctly vulgar. How depressing is mirth! How degrading it is to watch a laughing audience—a mere mob with uncontrolled facial muscles! Momus is the god of music-halls."

"Cheerfulness is not mirth," said Miranda quietly; "but you are sad yourself, Desdemona."

"I am," she replied, clasping her hands, "I am. It is quite true; I am encumbered with my Third Act."

"And I," said Miranda the straightforward, "am sad for Alan's sake."

"But you, Mr. Rondelet"—Desdemona turned to the Thinker, whom she loved at all times to bring out—"you, too, are melancholy. You neglect your monastic vows; you seldom appear at the refectory; you contribute nothing to the general happiness; you are visible at times, walking by yourself, with knitted brows. Is this to be explained?"

Paul Rondelet lifted his white brow and played with his eye-glass, and sighed. Then he gazed for a moment at Miranda.

Had he told the exact truth, he would have confessed that his debts worried him, that his anxiety about the future was very great. In fact, that he was entirely absorbed in the worry of his duns and the trouble of having no income at all in the immediate future. But he did not tell the truth. When facts are vulgar, truth-seekers like Paul Rondelet avoid them.

"The conduct of life," he said grandly, "is a problem so vast, so momentous, that there is not always room for pleasant frivolities, even for those of this little society. These are the trifles of a vacation. When serious thoughts obtrude themselves——"

"I see," said Desdemona, interrupting ruthlessly. "Why not write them down, and have done with them?"

Paul Rondelet shook his head.

"You are accustomed to interpret men's thoughts," he said, "you can give life and action to words; but you do not know by what mental efforts—what agonies of travail—those words were produced."

"Perhaps not," said Desdemona most unfeelingly. "I suppose small men suffer in their attempt to say things well. Shakespeare, Shelley, and Byron do not seem to have endured these throes."

Small men! Oh, this fatal lack of appreciation!

There was a cloud upon the whole Abbey. The sadness was not confined to the three or four named above; it was, with one exception, general. While Nelly lingered alone in her cell, while Tom Caledon rode or walked moodily in the lanes, while Mr. Paul Rondelet was seen to go alone with agitated steps, so that those who beheld thought that he was grappling with some new and brilliant thing in verse, the whole fraternity seemed drifting into a constrained self-consciousness most foreign to the character of the Order.

Nobody now went off in happy solitude to lecture an empty hall; the three journals of the Abbey appeared at more irregular intervals; Cecilia gave no concerts; nobody translated a new play; nobody invented a new amusement. Instead of general conversation, there was a marked tendency to go about in pairs. And when there was any singing at all, which was not every evening, as of old, it generally took the form of a duet.

What had befallen the Abbey?

There was, as I have said, one exception: Brother Peregrine alone was cheerful. Nothing ever interfered with a cheerfulness which at this juncture was unsympathetic; neither rainy weather, nor the general depression of the Brethren, nor even the sadness of Nelly, whom he continued to follow like a shadow. And yet, though he was always with her, though the Sisters wondered whether Nelly had accepted him, and while she wondered why he was silent, Brother Peregrine had not spoken the expected words.

To the rest it seemed as if the Court of Love, the Judgment of Paris, and all their masques, sports, dances, and entertainments, were become part and parcel of a happy past, which would never return again. Brother Peregrine alone was the same as he had always been. He alone was unconscious of the general discontent. This was due to his eminently unsympathetic character. He came to the Abbey with the purely selfish design of getting as much pleasure out of so novel a society as possible. He got a great deal. When he told stories, or did Indian tricks, or performed feats on horseback, which he had learned in India, the Sisters of the Order laughed and applauded, it was he who devised pageants, suggested things to

Desdemona, and improved on her ideas. Thus, the Judgment of Paris was his doing, and he acted, as we know, as Sister Rosalind's counsel in the Court of Love. While he could bask in the sunlight of fair eyes, delight in the music of girls' laughter, drink good wine, sit at feasts, listen to music, and be himself an active part in the promotion of all modern forms of conviviality, he was happy. He was exactly like the illustrious Panurge, in one respect, in being entirely without sympathy. You knew him, therefore, as well the first day as the fiftieth; there was nothing to be got out of him except what he offered at first. Had he put his creed into words, it would have been something like this:

"Everybody wants to enjoy life. I *mean* to, whether other people do or not; I take whatever good the gods send, and mean to use it for myself; if people wrong me, or annoy me by suffering, pain, or complaint, I go away, or else I take no notice of them."

The Abbey was an excellent place for such a man, because in no other place were the ways of life so smooth. And a man of such a temperament would be very long in discovering what Desdemona, with her quick sympathies, felt as soon as it began—the growing constraint.

For, of course, the Brethren and the Sisters were not going to sit down and cry or sulk, as is the wont of the outer world. There was neither growling nor grumbling in the Abbey, unless it were in each member's cell. Brother Peregrine noted nothing, because there was no outward change. If Nelly's cheek was pale, she listened to him still, and he followed her as before.

If the Order, generally, was depressed, there were still the functions—guest night, choral night, theatre, concert, dancing, all were duly celebrated. The Lady Abbess presided at the refectory, Desdemona performed her duties as directress of ceremonies, and the only difference was that the sparkle had gone out of the wine—it was gone flat. This they all perceived, except Brother Peregrine, who still thought the goblet as *mousseux* and as brilliant as before.

The climax was reached when they attempted one of their old costume balls, which had been a sort of *spécialité* of the Abbey. They got as many guests to fill their rooms as they could bring together; but—it was not possible to disguise the truth—it fell flat. The guests went away early; there was little spirit in the dancing; and the chief actors, who ought to have thrown life into it—the Monks and Sisters—were languid.

Next evening, after dinner, when they were all collected in the drawing-room, Desdemona lifted up her voice and asked tearfully:

"What is it, children? Is the wine of life already run down to the lees?"

No one answered, but the Sisters gathered round her as if they looked to her for help.

"Are there no more cakes and ale?" she went on. "Everything fails. Can the Abbey—our Abbey of Thelema—be a failure?"

"No—no," they declared unanimously.

"Are you happy here, my dears?" she asked the Sisters.

They looked at one another, blushed with one consent for some reason of their own unexplained, and then murmured that they had never been so happy before, and never could be happier in the future.

Brother Peregrine remarked that he himself felt perfectly, monastically happy. Indeed, he looked it, standing before them all, with his thin figure, his complacent smile, and his wonderful absence of any appreciation of the situation. Under any circumstances, if Brother Peregrine himself had no personal care he would have looked equally happy.

Desdemona contemplated him with a little wonder. Was the man perfectly self-contained? Even Paul Rondelet's philosophy of separation did not rise to these heights of blindness.

"If you are perfectly happy," said Desdemona sharply, "you are not monastically happy. Perhaps, on the other hand, you deserve to be pitied."

"Let us invent something," said Peregrine cheerfully, as if a fillip of that kind would restore happiness, just as certain ladies fly to little suppers with something hot in order to soothe the wounded spirit. "Has everybody lectured?"

He looked round radiantly, conveying his belief that a lecture was the one thing wanting.

No one would hear of lectures.

"I have learned a new conjuring trick," he went on. "Would you like to see that?"

"I think," said Desdemona, "that the present situation will not be improved by tricks."

"When the knights and ladies of the Middle Ages," Brother Peregrine went on, nothing daunted, "were shut up in their castles for the winter, they used to amuse themselves——"

"*Moult tristement*," said Desdemona.

"With games. Sometimes they played hot-cockles, the laws of which I dare say we could recover if we tried; or blind man's buff, which you would perhaps rather not play; or touch me last, which I can fancy might be made as graceful a pastime as lawn tennis. Then there was the game of *gabe*, at which everybody tried to out-brag everybody else ; and the favourite game of *le roy ne ment pas*, at which everybody had to answer truthfully whatever questions were asked. There were to be no reservations ; the answers were to be absolutely truthful."

"I should think," said Desdemona, "that your games must have been almost maddening in their stupidity. I would as soon suggest to the Abbey that we should amuse ourselves at *bouts rimés*. Will you play something, Cecilia ?"

She went to the piano and began to play some melancholy yearning music, such as might fall upon sad souls with a sympathetic strain.

Desdemona listened and reflected. All this dejection and constraint could not arise from disgust at Brother Hamlet's madness, or from sympathy with Tom Caledon. Sympathy there was, no doubt. Everybody liked Tom Disgust there was, no doubt. Everybody was indignant with Alan. But that all the springs of joy should be devoured by the disappointment of one Brother, and the crotchets of another, seemed absurd. And suddenly a thought came into her mind.

Desdemona caught it and smiled. Then she looked round the room and smiled again.

Cecilia was playing her melancholy music ; the Sisters were listening, pensive ; the Brothers stood or sat about among them in silence. Tom Caledon was in one window, looking gloomily upon the twilight garden ; Nelly was in another, pulling a rose to pieces. On the faces of all, except of two, there was in different degrees a similar expression, one of constraint, perhaps of impatience, and perhaps of hope.

Of course the two exceptions were Brother Peregrine and Paul Rondelet. When the former, who had no taste for music, was cut short by Desdemona, he retreated to a table at the other end of the long room, where, with a perfectly happy face, he found a book of burlesques, and read it with appreciation. Paul Rondelet entered the drawing-room just as Cecilia began to play. He, too, having no real ear for music, though he talked much of the Higher Music, and held Wagner among his gods, retired to the same part of the room as the Brother whom most he disliked. Here he found Mr. Pater's volume on the Renaissance, with which, while the following scene was enacted, he refreshed his soul.

"As for Peregrine," said Desdemona to herself, looking at his perfectly happy and perfectly unsympathetic face, "that man may have escaped from some great unhappiness, such as a convict's prison, or something as bad, so that everything else seems joy ; or he may be a perfectly selfish person, incapable of seeing beyond the outward forms, or—which I hope is not the case—he may have secured Nelly, and so chuckles easily over his own future."

Then she looked at the other man. Either Mr. Pater had made some remark which displeased Paul Rondelet, or he was thinking of something unpleasant unconnected with that author. "As for that man," thought Desdemona, "there is something wrong with him. To be sure, he never ought to have been a Monk at all. He has an anxious look. Perhaps he is in debt. It requires a man of a much higher stamp than that poor fellow to bear up against debt. Or some one may have derided his poetry."

It will be seen that Desdemona was not very far wrong in any of her conjectures. But then she was a witch, a sorceress.

"As for the rest," she continued to herself, "they are all afflicted with the same malady. It is not *ennui*, it is not boredom, it is not anxiety. What can it be but one thing ?"

And, as before, the sweetest and most gratified of smiles played about her comely face.

"Of course," she said aloud, so that all started, "I knew it would come, sooner or later. At least, I ought to have known, but did not think, being quite a stupid old woman. And now it has come."

"What *do* you mean, dear Desdemona ?" asked Cecilia, stopping her music.

"My dear," said Desdemona, "be good enough to stop that melancholy strain, which only expresses your own mood, and perhaps that of a few others, but not mine at all. I am an outsider, by reason of age and experience. Will you play for me only, and for nobody else, a grand triumphal march ?"

Cecilia obeyed, and straightway the air was filled with the trumpet-notes of triumph, the rejoicings of a multitude, the hymns of those who praise, and the shouts of those who offer thanks. Presently the hearts of the pensive Sisterhood rose with the music ; soft eyes brightened ; closed lips parted ; drooping heads were uplifted. When Desdemona presently looked round, Tom Caledon had joined Nelly in her window, and both looked happy. The Brothers and the Sisters were in groups and pairs. Only there was a change, she thought, because there was a touch of solemnity in all the masculine eyes, and of a certain veiled and happy triumph under the drooping feminine lids, as if this was no ordinary evening. Brother Peregrine, unmoved by the exultation, as he had been by the melancholy of the music, sat cheerfully smiling over his odd volume of burlesques. So, too, unmoved by music of despondency or triumph, sat the disciple of Wagner and the Higher Music, Mr.

Paul Rondolet, brooding over his cares. Music had no charms to make him forget his duns.

The music stopped with a final rapture, as if human joy could no further find expression.

Desdemona began, then, the speech, which more than anything else has endeared her to the hearts of those who listened. She had ever been the guiding spirit of the Abbey. It was she, we know, who invented their pageants and varied their entertainments. It was she who delighted the girls with her wisdom, her experience, and her sympathy. It was she who took care that the right Brother was told off for the right Sister; it was she who on occasion knew, better than any one, even better than Miranda, how to throw such a spirit into the Abbey as prevented it from becoming a mere place of idle amusement. To her they owed everything. But after this evening they agreed that their previous debt of gratitude was multiplied tenfold, and that they were bankrupt, one and all, in thanks. At least everybody said so, except Paul Rondelet and Brother Peregrine.

"The Abbey of Thelema, my dear Sisters," this benevolent person began, comfortably leaning back in the softest of armchairs, her feet upon a footstool, her hands clasped comfortably in her lap, her face just within the light of a shaded lamp, while two or three of the Sisters were lying at her feet, and the rest were grouped round her, and while the Brothers inclined a respectful ear—"The Abbey of Thelema was constituted to contain no Sisters but such as were young, comely, of good birth, and gracious manners. So far, with the exception of one, who is but a servant of the rest and an elderly woman—myself, my dears—the intentions of the Founder have been strictly carried out. I would he were here to-day in person to see how fair to look upon, and how gracious of demeanour, are the present Sisters of Thelema. And it was to contain no Monks but such as were also young, well bred, and of good repute. The Brothers are older at admission than they were at the first foundation, just as the undergraduates of the Universities are older at admission than they were five hundred years ago. Also the first Abbey was designed as the school of gentlehood; ours is an Abbey in which, like that of Fontévrault, the Monks and Sisters are already trained in the ways of the gentle life. But I wish that the Founder were here to-day to see what a goodly assemblage of Brothers we have to carry out his intentions. The Monks and Nuns of the old Thelema, as of ours, were to be bound by no conventual fetters; so far from that, as you know, they were bound to respect the vows which other Monks and Nuns officially deride. It was even contemplated by the Founder that the unrestrained society of knightly youth and gentle demoiselle would inevitably result—in honourable love;

and he showed in his dream how they would go forth as from a sacred Ark, in pairs, to spread throughout the world the blessings of gentleness and good-breeding."

Here Desdemona stopped, conscious of a "sensation" among her audience. She lowered the light at her elbow, and the discreet Tom Caledon, who, with Nelly, had joined the group and was now listening, thoughtfully lowered another lamp, which stood on a table at hand. Then there was a soft religious light, except at the other end of the long drawing-room, where Brother Peregrine was still chuckling over his burlesque, and Mr. Paul Rondelet was still grinding his teeth over his private troubles, or else over Mr. Pater's sweet and intelligible English.

"My children," Desdemona went on, in a lowered voice, "I have seen what has fallen upon this Abbey. Why should we hope to escape what, in his great wisdom, our Founder foresaw would happen? What have we done that we should go on prolonging indefinitely the simple joys which belong to the playtime of life? In all our pageants and in all our pleasures we have but been playing at happiness; preparing for the future as a schoolboy prepares himself in the playing-field for the battle-field. I think that this your play-time, and my great joy as one of the audience, is nearly over: I think that it is time to bring it to a close. Not altogether: other Abbeys of Thelema will be raised for other Monks and Sisters; we shall remain friends, and meet and greet each other; but ours, in its old form, will soon be as a memory."

No one spoke in reply.

"Tell me, dear Sisters—nay, dear children—that all is as it should be. There are no jealousies in the Abbey?"

"None," they murmured.

"Then the will of the Founder has been fairly carried out, and we may prophesy the closing of our Abbey with joy and congratulation. Tell me when you like, and as much as you like, to-morrow, my children. To-night we will have cheerful looks and happy hearts again, though the play is well-nigh finished."

She raised the light again. Tom disengaged his hands—what was it held them?—and turned up his lamp.

"To-day is Tuesday," said Desdemona, rising. "I announce a solemn banquet, a guest night, a choral night, a full-dress monastic night, for Saturday. I believe there will be no dancing, or singing, or any other amusement at all that day. Let us have as many guests as we can muster."

"But it is the day of Alan's wedding," said Miranda.

"My dear Miranda," Desdemona replied, with the slightest touch of asperity, "I have several times observed that Alan is not married yet."

"It is the day," said Nelly, "when mamma wishes me to return to Chester Square."

"My dear Nelly," said Desdemona, still with asperity, "do not make difficulties. You have not gone to Chester Square yet. Perhaps you will not go on that day at all."

There was an inharmonious chuckle from the other end of the room. Brother Peregrine had come to a very funny part. It seemed as if he was chuckling in reply to Desdemona.

Nelly looked at him and shuddered; but no one spoke.

"On Saturday," Desdemona went on, "we will have a full meeting, even if it be our last. Till then, my children, be happy with each other."

Cecilia took her zither and touched the chords.

"May I sing," she asked, "the 'Rondeau of the Land of Cocaigne'?" It was prophetic of the Abbey of Thelema.

"In the land of Cocaigne, where travellers tell,
All delights and merriments dwell,
Love, and joy, and music, and mirth,
Loss of trouble, and lack of dearth—
There I found me a magic well,
Deep in the greenest depths of a dell,
Lined with moss, and edged with shell,
Precious above all springs of the earth,
In the land of Cocaigne.
I drank of the waters; straight there fell
Behind me, each with the clang of a knell,
The days of grief: Love sprang to birth,
Laden with gifts of gladness and worth,
And singing a song of a wedding-bell
In the land of Cocaigne."

CHAPTER XXXV.

"She is a woman, therefore may be wooed."

If the other Brothers of the Order were contemplating marriage with the ardour of lovers, Mr. Paul Rondelet was considering that condition of life, as calmly as his creditors would allow him, as a haven of refuge. His position was really unequalled in history. Addison, to be sure, endured a temporary period of poverty; but Paul Rondelet was about to face destitution. In another short half year he would be without an income—absolutely without any money at all; already every other post brought letters from once trustful tradesmen, some openly threatening, some darkly hinting at legal proceedings. Think of the absurdity of the thing. A man actually in the very van and forefront of modern culture: a man with a following of his own: a leading member of the Advanced School: a man so exalted above his fellows that he could afford to feel pity, a gentle pity—not contempt or exasperation at all—with those who still believed in Christianity, patriotism, the old ideas about poetry or art: a man so skilled in the jargon of Art criticism, that people forgot to ask whether he knew a good picture when he saw one, and accepted on his dictum lean and skinny women, with red hair and sad faces, as the highest flights of modern art; so apt with the jargon of modern poetic criticism, that people only gasped and supposed that, after all, knock-kneed spasms of unreal rapture or crack-jaw dithyrambs, where nonsense pretended to be profundity incapable of articulate speech—was the real, and hitherto undiscovered poetry—so apt, also, with the latest book jargon, that it required a cool head to discover that he seldom read a new book at all. Such a man was positively going out into the cold and unsympathetic world without an income.

England is not like the East: you cannot wander from village to village, another Mohammed, with your following of listeners, living on the dates, rice, pillau, olives, figs, and bread, offered freely to all travellers; nor is it like that France of six hundred years ago, when an Abélard could retire into the country and pitch a philosophic tent, surrounded by thirty thousand disciples.

Faint thoughts did cross the mind of Paul Rondelet that he, too, might set up his own lecture tent, say on Salisbury Plain, whither the undergraduates might flock, for the sake of the Higher Culture. But no: it was a dream—a dream.

It was already three weeks since he first made up his mind that Miranda should be his wife; since, in fact, he heard that Alan was resolved upon his matrimonial suicide. There were, most certainly, other Sisters in the Abbey desirable for beauty, and not wholly destitute of culture or of money. But Miranda alone seemed to this leader of modern thought wholly worthy to wear his name. She appeared to appreciate him, which he felt could not be said of all the other ladies; she was undeniably beautiful; she was possessed of many broad acres. Her beauty was of a kind which Paul Rondelet felt he would admire more in his own wife than in other people's. For it was not the beauty lauded by his own school. She was not lithe, lissom, and serpentine; she had none of the grace of the leopardess about her; her eye was lit by no baleful fires of passion. she was not skinny or bony; she did not writhe as she walked; she was not sad-avised; nor was her hair like unto that of the painted dames in the Grosvenor Gallery, or of the yellow-haired Somanli who greets the traveller at Aden; it was not yellow tow at all. And in dress she made fashion her slave instead of her mistress. She was not, in short, either in appearance, in dress, or in manner, at all like unto the self-conscious young woman who follows the newest fashions of self-conscious and priggish modern art.

Paul Rondelet felt that he should be proud of her. It must be said of him, the Master, the Poet, the man of Taste, the Prophet of Higher Culture, the fastidious Paul Rondelet, before whose decision, as his school considered, artists trembled, that he had chosen a companion worthy of himself.

Above all things, the man of Higher Culture is a critic. As his wines, his engravings, his chairs, his bookbinding, his water-colours, his dinners, his little Sunday morning breakfasts, must all be perfect, so must his wife be perfect. Now, Paul Rondelet felt that he could visit Oxford proudly with Miranda, or, better still, make of Dalmeny Hall a perfect home, an improved Oxford, a college without the uncongenial element.

He went over to the house in order to examine for himself its capabilities. True, it was not like Weyland Court—very few houses are—but still there were great things to be done with Dalmeny Hall, by one who knew how to work. Two or three rooms, he thought, would lend themselves with peculiar readiness to the modern Nobler Treatment. One might even be converted into a peacock-room. All of them, with right paper, right fireplaces, right cabinets, right china, right Harmonies in Blue or Brown, right chairs, and right tables, might be converted into apartments, in which even the most advanced would find pleasure. Life, he thought, might be made philosophically perfect at Dalmeny Hall. Certain modifications would be made : he could not allow Desdemona, a person who pretended to no sympathy with him or his school, to consider, as she did at present, the house her own. Miranda herself would require in some respects a certain amount of moulding before she became perfectly imbued with the newest ideas. It was unfortunate for her, he considered, that Alan Dunlop, who had exercised so great an influence over her, left Oxford before the opinions of the school arrived at their full development ; that is to say, before they quite grasped the doctrines that patriotism is a mark of Philistinism—the true country of every philosopher being the world—religion a pitiable survival of the Dark Ages : all the art, architecture, music, and poetry of the last three hundred years—except, perhaps, the architecture of Queen Anne—a wretched exhibition of ignorance, bad taste, and vulgarity. When Alan went away they had only arrived at the stage of looking on whatever pleases the majority of mankind with contempt, pity, and suspicion.

But he should mould her : he should be able, through her very admiration of himself, to inspire a desire for higher levels of thought. Together, while poor Alan, mated to his rustic beauty, worked his heart out in a hopeless endeavour, they too, he thought, should present to high and low the admirable spectacle of the perfect Olympian life.

It was difficult to get an opportunity of finding Miranda alone. Paul Rondelet—I think I have remarked that all the members of his school spoke of him as Paul Rondelet, not as Rondelet, or Mr. Rondelet, but plain Paul, as one speaks of Burne Jones, Julius Cæsar, and other illustrious men—sought in vain for many following days. It was partly that quest of an opportunity which drove him to wander ceaselessly in the gardens, in the courts of the Abbey, and in the park between Weyland Court and Dalmeny Hall.

Desdemona, who watched everything, marked his uncertain steps and wondered.

"Another trouble," said Miranda to Desdemona.

But she did not look troubled.

"What is it, dear?"

"It is Mr. Rondelet," she replied calmly. "He is going to offer me his hand."

"My dear Miranda!" Desdemona cried, in some alarm. "Pray, be careful. He is a young man to whom it will be necessary to speak very plainly. But you may be mistaken."

"Not at all, I am quite sure. Remember that I have had experience. It interests me a good deal now to watch the beginnings of these things."

Miranda sat down, and went on with her experience.

"I grew to discern their intentions almost as soon as they formed the idea in their own minds. Then I used to study the development, and, when the time came, I was perfectly prepared with my answer. And I cannot be mistaken in Mr. Rondelet. All he wants is an opportunity."

"And will you give him one?"

"I think I must. It is always better to get these things over. Poor Mr. Rondelet! I dare say he spared me out of consideration to Alan, until that—that engagement. It was good of him."

"It would have been better to have spared you altogether.

"My dear, Mr. Rondelet is poor, and I am rich," said Miranda. "He shall have his opportunity."

In fact, she gave him an opportunity the very next day.

He found her in her own garden alone. Alma had been with her, unwilling, and had just escaped, leaving Miranda saddened at the hopelessness of getting at the better side of the girl, who continued to remain dull, apathetic, and reserved. In fact she was thinking, day and night, of nothing but the splendid *tour de force* which Harry was about to perform for her deliverance. The knowledge of this coming event enabled her to be less careful about hiding her discontent and sulkiness, so that she was by no means an agreeable companion.

When Paul Rondelet came upon Miranda, there was a look of languor and fatigue in her face, but her cheek brightened with a quick flush when she saw him walking delicately across the grass, putting up and dropping his eye-glass. Her eyes lit up, but her lips set themselves firm—she was going to hear and to reply to a proposal, unless, as had happened in other cases, he would, at the last moment, become nervous.

Such was not Paul Rondelet's intention. He had been looking at the case to himself, for some days past, from as many points of view as Mr. Browning loves to contemplate a murder. It would be said that he married for money. To be sure, had Dalmeny Hall belonged to himself, he would not have fettered himself with a wife. His school do not greatly love matrimony; on the other hand, he might fairly urge that he brought his wife a fair equivalent for her fortune ; and though he was not her equal either in birth—his grandfather belonged to the prehistoric period, and was only conjectural—or in wealth, he was a leader in the most advanced school of Oxford.

If Oxford, as all true Oxonians believe, and would suffer lingering tortures rather than give up, leads the thought of the world, then, confessedly, Lothian leads Oxford, and Paul Rondelet led, or thought he led, Lothian. Therefore, Paul Rondelet led the world.

"You may have observed, Miss Dalmeny,"—Miranda noticed that there was not a bit of love in his face—"You may have observed"—here he let fall his eye-glass, and put it up twice—"that I have of late endeavoured to convey to you an idea of the feelings which—which——"

"Not at all," said Miranda, untruthfully. "Pray sit down, Mr. Rondelet, and tell me what you mean."

"Let me," he said, sitting down at one end of the garden-seat, Miranda occupying the other ; "let me put the case from our own—I mean the Higher Modern—point of view. Our school have arrived at this theory, that it is useless and even mischievous to attempt to promote culture. Especially is it mischievous when such efforts lead to personally interesting one's self with the lower classes. They are led, among other things, to believe that they are not entirely deserving of scorn. Therefore, we have decided on a return to the principles of the Renaissance."

"Really," said Miranda, looking at him with a little amusement in her eyes. This infinite condescension at the same time irritated her.

"Our plan of life is—separation. We leave the vulgar herd entirely to themselves; and we live alone, among our own set, on our own level."

"Will not that be very dull? Should you admit the Monks and Sisters of Thelema?"

Paul Rondelet hesitated, and dropped his glass; then he replaced it, with a sigh.

"I fear not. Perhaps one or two. But, Miss Dalmeny, the higher life cannot be dull. It has too many resources. It is great, though perhaps the vulgar cannot know its greatness; it is memorable and precious, though it is spent apart from mankind. We care nothing about our reputation among men. We belong to the lower levels in no way—the poor may help the poor, we shall not help them at all, or vex our souls about them. We are no longer English, or French, or Russian, or German; we are no longer Catholics or Anglicans, or anything: we propose to divest ourselves of any, even the slightest, interest in their religions, their politics, or their aims; we are alone among ourselves, the Higher Humanity."

"Oh!" said Miranda again. "And what are we, then? I always thought, in my conceit, that I belonged by birth and education to the Higher Humanity."

Paul Rondelet shook his head sadly.

"Alas! no," he said; "I would that we could acknowledge your right to rank with Us. It is not a matter of birth, but one of culture. The Higher Humanity consists entirely of the best intellects trained in the best school. The men can only, therefore, be Oxford men, and presumably of Lothian."

"And the women—oh! Mr. Rondelet—I should so much like to see the women of the Higher Humanity."

Was she laughing at him, or was this genuine enthusiasm?

"The women," he said, "either the wives of the men, or their disciples, must be trained by the men."

"And must they, too, be great scholars?"

"Nay," he replied kindly. "What we look for in women is the Higher Receptivity"—it really was exasperating that Paul Rondelet wanted everything of the higher order—"The Higher Receptivity, coupled with real and natural taste, hatred for debasement, especially in Art, a love for Form, an eye for the Beautiful, and a positive ardour to rise above prejudice. One of us was recently engaged, for instance, to a lady who seemed in every way adapted for his wife . . ."

"Was he a leader in the Advanced School?"

"He was a—a—, in fact, one of the leaders." Paul Rondelet spoke as if there was in reality one leader only—himself. "After training her carefully in the Separation Doctrine, my friend had the unhappiness of actually seeing her come out of a cottage where she had been personally mixing with women of the lowest grade, and giving them things to eat."

"How very dreadful!"

"Yes. He confided the case to me. He said that he had passed over in silence her practice of going to church, because old habits linger. But this was too much for his patience. She had to be told in delicate but firm language that the engagement was broken off. The sequel showed that we were right."

"What was that?"

"Instead of sorrowing over her failure to reach the Higher Level, this unhappy girl said that she was already tired of it, and shortly afterwards actually married a Clerical Fellow!"

"What a shocking thing!" said Miranda, deeply interested in this anecdote.

Paul Rondelet had been speaking with great solemnity, because all this was part of the Higher Level, and meant to prepare Miranda.

Now he began to speak more solemnly still.

"You have seen us, Miss Dalmeny," he went on. "At least you have seen me—one of our School. It has been my privilege to make your acquaintance in the Abbey of Thelema—a place, so to speak, of half culture. There are, that is, the elements of the Higher Culture, prevented from full development by such members as Caledon and others——"

"My very dear friends," said Miranda.

"Pardon me. I am speaking only from the—from my own point of view. No doubt, most worthy people. However, I have fancied, Miss Dalmeny, that in you I have seen the possibility of arriving at the Higher Level"—Miranda thought that this man was really the greatest of all Prigs she had ever seen. "In fact," he added, with a quiet smile, "one is never mistaken in these matters, and I am *sure* you are worthy of such elevation."

"Really, Mr. Rondelet, I ought to be very much gratified."

"Not at all; we learn discernment in the Higher Criticism. I saw those qualities in you from the beginning. But I have reflected, and Miss Dalmeny, if you will accept me as your guide to the regions of the Higher Thought, we will together tread those levels, and make of life a grand harmonious poem, of which not one word shall be intelligible to the Common Herd. Its very metre, its very rhythm, shall be unintelligible to them."

"If you please, Mr. Rondelet, leave the language of allegory, and tell me, in that of the Common Herd, what it is you ask me to do?"

He turned red. After this magnificent overture, leading to a short *aria* of extraordinary novelty, to be asked to clothe his meaning in plain English—it was humiliating."

"I mean," he explained, after a gulp of dissatisfaction, and dropping his eye-glass once—"I mean, Miss Dalmeny, will you marry me?"

"Oh———h!" Miranda did not blush, or tremble, or gasp, or faint, or manifest any single sign of surprise or confusion. It was as if she had been asked to go for a drive. "You ask me if I will marry you. That is a very important question to put, and I must have a little time to answer it. No—do not say any more at present. We shall meet in the evening as if this talk had not been held. Good-morning, Mr. Rondelet."

She rose in her queenly fashion and walked across the lawn to the house, leaving him confused and uncertain.

Had she appreciated him? Did she realise what he brought to her? He reflected with satisfaction that his method of approaching the subject had at least the merit of novelty. Certainly, very few women had ever been invited to contemplate matrimony in such a manner.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"He's armed without who's innocent within."

THREE days before the wedding, Harry made no sign and sent no message to Alma. But she had faith. It *could* not be that a man like her Harry, backed as he was by Mr. Caledon, would fail her. She was perfectly certain that all would be well, and she waited in patience, no longer trying to please, and careless about pretending to be a lady.

In fact, the conspirators were not idle. Tom went to town, in order to obtain what Desdemona called the most important of the properties—the special license. The clergyman was found in an old friend of Tom's, who consented, on learning the whole circumstances, to perform the ceremony. The plot was, in fact, completely worked out, and, as Desdemona said, nothing remained but to hope that the situations would go off without any hitch.

On Wednesday, things being in this forward state, Desdemona and Tom walked across the park to the gamekeeper's cottage. It was empty, but the door stood open—a proof that the owner was not very far away—and the two entered the little room with its smoked and blackened rafters, which seemed dark after the blinding sunlight, and sat down to await Harry's return.

"This is like plunging into a cave to concert a robbery with a band of brigands," said Desdemona, taking Harry's wooden arm chair. "In fact, I never felt so much like a conspirator before, not even on the stage. And as for the stage, the illusion is all in the front. . . . Tom," she resumed, after a pause, "I do not like it at all."

"Nor do I," Tom confessed.

"I can see you do not. 'How in the looks doth conscious guilt appear.' If it were only not for Lord Alwyne and Miranda——"

"It does seem hard," said Tom, "that a fellow can't be allowed to make himself a fool in his own way."

"That is not the way to put it at all," said Desdemona, rousing herself for an apology. "Let me put it so that we shall be able to comfort ourselves with noble motives. All wicked people do that, you know. Fancy the pious rapture of Guy Fawkes just before he was going to light the match; think of the approval which the conscience of Ravaillac must have bestowed upon him on the king's coach coming in sight. Let us apply the same balms to our own case. People may say—people who don't understand motives—that we two were Alan's most intimate and trusted friends, and that, notwithstanding, we deliberately conspired together to frustrate his most cherished project."

"I think, Desdemona," said Tom, "that you must have learned the art of comforting a sinner from the Book of Job. To be sure, people may say that; but you forget that we haven't been found out yet. And Harry won't tell."

"It will come out some day," said Desdemona, gloomily. "Crimes like ours always do come out. I shall very likely reveal the secret on my death-bed. That will be a bad job for you. Or else you will go mad with the suspicion that I may some day tell, take me to a secret place in a forest, push me down a deep well, and drop big stones on my head. I shall creep out when you are gone, nothing the worse except for a bump as big as a cricket-ball on my skull, and a broken leg; and I shall creep after you, taking revenge in separate lumps as the opportunity offers. When I have got all the revenge that a Christian woman wants, I shall disclose myself, and you will die—under the lime-light, repentant, slowly, and to the music of the stringed instruments."

"Thank you," said Tom. "Now, tell me, please, how we ought to put it to ourselves."

"Thus," said the actress. "This extravagance of Alan affects others beside himself. The result of the step he proposes would be so disastrous that at any cost it must be prevented. He does not know the girl he is going to marry; he has conceived an entirely wrong impression of her character. His father, my old friend——"

"And mine," said Tom, feeling comfort in that reflection.

"Will be deeply grateful to us. Miranda will be grateful. After a time, Alan will be grateful; and as for the rest of the world, why—*il y a des reproches qui louent.*"

"Yes—and—Harry? Do you think he will be grateful after a time, too?' asked Tom. "You see, Desdemona, your estimate of the young lady's character is not a high one."

"Grateful? Well, in a way. The man's in love with her. He does not, in his heart, believe that she is a bit better than the majority of women in her class. But just now it is good for him to think so. Depend upon it, Tom, it is not a bad thing for a man to find out that his wife is no better a human creature than himself, probably not so good."

"Desdemona," said Tom, "don't be hard on your sex."

"I am not," she replied; "I am only just. Do you think Nelly an angel?"

"Yes," he said stoutly, "I do, and I don't want any other kind of angel. People my paradise with one angel, and let her be Nelly, with all her moods and wilfulness, just as she is. I shall be satisfied."

"You are a good fellow, Tom, and you deserve her. Pity that while you were about it, you could not have made that little document in your pocket a transferable ticket. We might then, at the very last moment, change the names from Harry and Alma to Tom and Nelly."

He shook his head sadly.

"The good old days!" she lamented. "Oh for a postchaise and four, and Gretna Green! or for a Fleet parson! What opportunities our ancestors had!"

"You can get a special license now," said Tom: "costs five guineas—that is what I've got for Harry."

"It is the one thing they have left us. Then, Tom, if you do not immediately—but here comes the third conspirator."

Tom explained to Harry that he had gone to London in order to obtain, through certain legal persons, a document which made it possible for him and Alma to get married to each other. And then he handed him the precious epistle.

"And with this bit o' paper," said Harry, doubtfully, "it is lawful for Alma and me to marry?"

He turned it all ways to catch the light, and blushed to think of the solicitude of the greatest persons in the realm after his welfare.

"And now," said Desdemona, "when shall we marry them?"

"The sooner the better," said Harry. "If there's going to be words, best have them over."

He was thinking of Bostock, but it seemed almost as if he was thinking of future matrimonial jars.

"We might manage on Friday," said Tom. "I am afraid it is too late to arrange for to-morrow. My friend the curate will do it on any day. After the marriage you can drive to Dalmeny Hall, and then send for Mr. Dunlop and have it out. You can tackle the Bailiff afterwards."

"Ay," said Harry; "I'm not afeared of the Bailiff. There'll be a vast of swearing, and that's all. Bailiff Bostock knows me. It is the Squire I am afeard on. He'll take it hard: me an old servant, and—there—once almost a friend I was, when we were both boys."

"You are a friend of his still, Harry," said Tom. "When he understands that it was your own bride he was going to take, it will all come right. But perhaps just at first there may be some sort of shindy."

"It cannot be on Friday," said Desdemona. "I remember now that Alma's wedding-dress is not to be ready till Friday afternoon. The poor girl must wear her fine frock, if only for once. You must arrange, Tom, to get the ceremony over and to drive back to the Hall before they ought to be starting for church. That, I think, will be the most effective as well as the most considerate way of leading up to the situation. It is not bad, as dramas go." She sprang from her chair, alert and active, and became again an actress. "A rehearsal. Stand there, Harry, as far back as the footlights—I mean the fender—will allow. Miranda and I are grouped here in an attitude of sympathetic expectation." (Here her face suddenly assumed a look of such deep sympathy, that Tom burst out laughing, and Harry was confounded.) "Alan is in the centre, up the stage; on your arm, Harry, is Alma." (Harry involuntarily glanced at his manly arm, as if Alma might really, by some magic of this wonderful lady, be there, but she was not.) "She is in her beautiful wedding frock and bonnet; she is looking shy and a little frightened, but so pretty that she has engaged the sympathies of the whole house. Alan, taken by surprise, moves a half-step forward; Miranda and I, surprised and wondering, take a half-step nearer him; we murmur our astonishment; Miranda, who is statuesque, and therefore does not gesticulate, turns her eyes mutely upon Alma; I, who am, or was thirty years ago, *mignonne*, hold up my hands—it is a very effective gesture, if done naturally; and then, Tom (I am afraid I *must* put you in the last scene, and concealment will be impossible), you step forward—oh, Tom!" here she betrayed a little irritation because Tom, instead of throwing himself into the situation, was actually grinning), "why *can't* you act a little? You step forward easily and quietly—you make a point, because your knowledge is the key of the whole situation—and you say, taking Alma by the hand, 'Alan, let me present to you—Harry

Cardew's wife!' Now, that is really a very telling situation, if you could only think of it."

"I did not think of the situation," said Tom.

"No, you silly boy, you did not." Desdemona sat down again, and put off the actress. "If people would only think of the situation, and how it would look on the stage, none of the silly things, and only the picturesquely wicked things, would be done. 'All the world's a stage.' Yes; and there is always an audience. And none of us ever play our little part without some to applaud and some to hiss. They are a sympathetic audience, and they express their feelings vigorously. Dear me! he does not think of the situation. Live, Harry Cardew, as if you were always on the boards—walk, talk, think, as if you were speaking before the theatre. Do you understand?"

The honest gamekeeper did not. He had never seen a theatre.

"However," continued Desdemona, "we are preparing the last scene of a comedy which will be numerously attended, and keenly criticised, so to speak; we must not spoil it by carelessness in the final tableau. We must make all we can out of it. As for you, Harry, you will be a hero for a few days. And you, Tom, must make up your mind to criticism. Play your part boldly. Make your mark in the last act. In the evening there will be a grand Function in the Abbey, at which you, too, ought to be a hero."

"And the row with Bostock?" asked Harry, who believed that this lady was able to control the future exactly; "has your ladyship fixed when and where that is to come off?"

"No; in fact, I quite forgot that detail. But it does not matter so much, as it will not probably get into the papers. A mere piece of by-play, an episode. It ought, perhaps, to come before the last situation; but, after all, it does not greatly signify. I suppose the farmer is certain to use language of the strongest."

"After all—saving your ladyship's presence—what," asked Harry, "what matters a few damns?"

"Nothing," said Desdemona, quoting Bob Acres. "They have had their day. And now, Harry, take great care of the document. We shall tell Alma—not to-morrow, but on Friday. Perhaps a hint to-morrow will keep up her spirits."

"He is much too good for her," said Desdemona; "but I am in hopes it will turn out well. There is one great point in favour of their happiness."

"What is that?"

"She is afraid of him," said Desdemona, student of womankind. "A wholesome terror of her husband, with such a girl, goes a long way. She will feel that she has got a man to rule her."

At the Abbey they found that Lord Alwyne had arrived. He was, in fact, sitting with a bevy of Sisters. Nothing, he was wont to say, more effectually removes the cares of the world or makes a man forget his own age, sooner than the society of young and beautiful ladies. He ought to have been born in the seventeenth century, and basked in the gardens of Vaux, or beneath the smiles of the ladies who charmed away the declining years of La Fontaine. When Desdemona's tea was taken to her cell, Lord Alwyne came with it, and the fraternity, even including Miranda, abstained from entering that pleasant retreat, because they knew that the talk would be serious and would turn on Alan.

"I found myself growing anxious," Lord Alwyne said. "I hoped to learn that you had done something, that something had been done by somebody, somehow, to break it off. But the days passed by, and no letter came. And so—and so I have come down to learn the worst: of course, nothing can happen now to stop it." He looked wistfully at Desdemona. "It is too late now."

"Why, there are three whole days before us. This is Wednesday. What may not happen in three days?"

"Desdemona, have you anything to tell me?"

"Nothing, Lord Alwyne." She kept her eyes down, so that he should not read her secret there. "Nothing," she repeated.

"But there will be something?"

"Who knows? There are yet three days, and at all events we may repeat what I said a month ago—they are not married yet."

"Then I may hope? Desdemona, have mercy."

She looked up, and saw on the face of her old friend a pained and anxious expression which she had never before seen. No man had ever spent a more uniformly happy, cheerful, and yet unselfish life. It seemed as if this spoiled son of fortune naturally attracted the friendship of those only who were fortunate in their destinies as well as in their dispositions. Misfortune never fell upon him or upon his friends. It gave Desdemona a shock to see that his face, as bright at fifty-five as at twenty-five, was capable of the unhappiness which has generally quite distorted the features of men at that age.

"My dear old friend," she cried, "what am I to say? I cannot bear to see you suffer. Have more than hope. Have confidence."

He took her hand and raised it to his lips with a courtesy more than Castilian.

"I ask no more, Desdemona. Tell me another time what you have done."

"You will have to thank Tom Caledon," she replied. "It is he, and a third person who is indispensable, whom you will have to thank."

"Tell me no more, Desdemona. What thanks of mine could equal this service? Tell me no more."

He was more deeply moved than Desdemona had ever seen him.

"I have been making myself wretched about the boy," he said, walking up and down the room. "It was bad enough to read of his doings with a pitchfork and a cart: it would make the most good-tempered man angry to be asked in the clubs about the Shepherd Squire, his son; but that only hurt Alan himself. Far worse to think that he was going to commit the—the CRIME of marrying a dairymaid."

"I suppose," said Desdemona, "that it is natural for you to think most of the *mésalliance:* I dare say I should myself, if I had any ancestors. What I *have* thought of most is the terrible mistake of linking himself for life with such a girl, when he might have had—even Miranda, perhaps. You cannot expect me quite to enter into your own point of view."

"I do not defend myself, Desdemona," said the man of a long line, with humility, as if he felt the inferiority of his position. "It is part of our nature, the pride of birth. Alan ought to have had it from both sides. I taught him, from the first, to be proud of the race from which he sprung. I used to show him the family tree, and talk to him about his predecessors, till I feared I was making him as proud of his descent as a Montmorenci or a Courtenay. In my own case, the result of such teaching was a determination to keep the stream as pure as I found it, or not to marry at all. With him the result is, that it does not matter how much mud he pours in, provided he can carry out an experiment. He fools away his children's pride for a hobby. To do this wrong to his children seems to me, I own, even a worse crime than to forget his ancestors."

"I see," said Desdemona, "what I call a misfortune you call a crime."

"Every misfortune springs from a crime, my dear Desdemona," said Lord Alwyne, sententiously. "This anxiety has made me feel ten years older; and when I thought I had lost my son I rejoiced, for the first time, to feel older."

"You will find him again, dear Lord Alwyne," she said softly, "in a few days. In fact, on Saturday. Remain with us till then. Perhaps it will be as well that you should not meet him, unless he hears that you have arrived. And reckon confidently on going home in ease of mind, and ready to commence again that pleasant life of yours which has no duties and no cares, but only friendships."

He took her hand again, and pressed it almost like a lover.

"Always the same, kind Desdemona," he said; "Clairette Fanshawe was the best woman, as well as the best and prettiest actress, that ever trod the stage. Do you think, Clairette"—it was twenty years since he had called her Clairette—"do you think that we really made the most of our youth while it lasted? Did we, *d'une main ménagère*, as the French poet advises, get the sweetness out of every moment. To be sure the memory of mine is very pleasant. I cannot have wasted very much of it."

"Perhaps," said Desdemona, smiling—she had spent the greater part of her youth in hard study, and the rest in bitter matrimonial trouble with a drunkard—"perhaps one lost a day here and there, particularly when there was work to do. It is unpardonable in a woman to waste her youth, because there is such a very little of it. But as for men, their youth seems to last as long as they please. You are young still, as you always have been. To be sure, your position was a singularly happy one."

"It was," said Lord Alwyne; "but you are wrong, Desdemona, in supposing that my life had no duties. My duty was to lead the idle life, so that it might seem desirable. Other people, hard-working people, learned to look upon it as the one for which they ought to train their sons. But it wants money: therefore these hard-working people worked harder. Thus I helped to develop the national industry, and, therefore, the national prosperity. That is a very noble thing to reflect upon. Desdemona, I have been an example and a stimulus. And yet you say that I have had no duties."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"Oh! bid me leap, rather than marry Paris,
From off the battlements of yonder tower."

BROTHER PEREGRINE'S suit resembled, by reason of its length, a suit in Chancery. It never made any progress. He always carried the same cheerful smile in his crowsfooted eyes, always appeared in the same imperturbable good-humour. He never seemed to notice whether the girl to whom he attached himself was pleased to have him about her or not, being one of those happy persons who practised, though from a different motive, the same cult of selfishness preached by Paul Rondelet. He was a man who would play with a child till it cried, when he would put the plaything down and go away to find another.

His business was to amuse himself—"What is my land to one who is home from India, but a delightful garden full of pleasures?" The society of this beautiful and coquettish girl, full of odd moods and as changeable as a day in April, was pleasant to him—what did he care whether he was pleasant to her? He congratulated himself on his superiority to Tom, because he saw so much more of her.

But no progress. Plenty of compliments, pretty speeches without end; little presents of things from India, such as tiger-claw brooches, fans of scented wood, glass bottles gilded outside and filled with a tiny thread of precious essence, filigree work in silver, tiny chains of gold, bangles rudely worked—all these things accepted as part of his wooing. But the fatal words, which she feared and yet wished to have done with, so that there should be a final end with poor Tom—these did not come.

There was plenty of opportunity. Never was a place so admirably adapted for the interchange of such confidences as the Abbey of Thelema, with its corridors, cells, gardens, and wooded park. And at this juncture everybody seemed busily occupied in whispering secrets. What did the man mean? The situation, too, was becoming ridiculous; all the world—that is, the monastic world—watched it with interest. Also Mrs. Despard seemed, by her letters, to have some uneasy suspicion that all was not right. She even threatened to visit the Abbey herself, if only to expostulate, while yet there was time, with Alan Dunlop on his infatuated and suicidal intention. Most of her letters, in whole or in part, found their way to Tom—either they were read to him, or the contents were imparted to him in conversation.

"If she does come here, Tom," said Nelly, "which Heaven forbid, two things will happen immediately. You will have to leave the Abbey the day before her arrival, and—and—that other event will be settled at once."

"You mean——" said Tom.

"There is no occasion, Tom, to put everything into words."

Tom became silent.

"I think I have put too much into words already. I wonder," she went on, "whether you like me the better or the worse for telling you truthfully?"

"Everything, Nelly," said Tom, hoarsely, "makes me like you better every day."

"I *could* not, after your beautiful speech at the Court of Love, which went right to my heart, Tom—I *could* not bear you to think that I was only flirting with you all the time. I liked you too well. Poor Tom! Do many other girls like you too?"

"They don't tell me so if they do. But of course they don't. How girls ever do like men, I do not know."

"It is because they are not men," said the damsel wisely

"People would call it unmaidenly, I suppose, to tell a man—what I have told you—particularly when the man wants to marry you, and you can't marry him. But you don't think it unmaidenly, do you?"

"As if you could do anything but what is sweet and good, Nell! But you cannot know how much——"

"Hush, Tom; don't put that into words—don't; it only makes us both unhappy."

"Of course, I know," said Tom, ruefully. "I am next door to a pauper, and so are you, poor girl; and we are both expensive people; and there would be debts and things."

"Debts and borrowing, Tom, and not being able to pay back; and going on the Continent, and living in lodgings, and staying with people who would invite us, to save money. How should you like that?"

"You always think of the worst, Nelly. There's Sponger, formerly of Ours, does that. Got two hundred a year; goes everywhere, and is seen everywhere; stays with people. They say he disappears for two months every year, when he is supposed to go to Whitechapel and sweep a crossing where sailors are free with their coppers, I believe——"

Nelly interrupted this amusing anecdote.

"That is like you, Tom. Just as I was getting into a comfortable crying mood, when nothing else does me so much good as a little sympathy, you spoil it all by one of your stupid stories. What do I care about Sponger of Ours?"

"I thought you were talking about staying with people."

"Is the story about Sponger one of the stories which the old novels used to tell us kept the mess-room in a roar? If so, a mess-room must be an extremely tiresome place."

This conversation took place on Wednesday afternoon. In the evening, to please Lord Alwyne, Desdemona improvised a little costume party, in which everybody appeared in some Watteau-like dress, which was very charming to the Sisters, and mightily became such of the Monks as were well-favoured. They danced minuets and such things as such shepherds and shepherdesses would have loved. Brother Peregrine led out Nelly for a performance of this stately old dance; they went through it with great solemnity.

"Are they engaged?" asked Cecilia, watching them.

"I cannot tell, my dear," said Desdemona. "The man is a riddle. Nelly does not look at him the least as a girl generally looks on an accepted lover. What does it mean?"

"I had a letter to-day," Cecilia went on, "from Mrs. Despard. She says that Alan's conduct has alarmed her so much that she thinks of coming to take her daughter home. I suppose she thinks that we are going to follow Alan's example, and marry the dairyman's son, as he is engaged to the dairyman's daughter. It will be a great loss to us."

"Greater changes are going to happen," said Desdemona. "Am I blind? When do you go, my child?"

Cecilia blushed prettily. She was a very charming girl, and her little idyl of love had gone on quite smoothly, else I would have told the story. The commonplace lot is the happiest; yet it does not read with much interest.

"John——" she began.

"Brother Bayard," said Desdemona. "I shall always know him by that name."

"Wants to take me away at once; but I shall insist on waiting till the autumn."

"May you be happy, my dear!"

"'You have consented to create again,
That Adam called 'the happiest of men.'"

Cecilia laughed.

"What you said the other night accelerated things. Desdemona, I should not be surprised if you were to receive a great many confidences before long."

"And no jealousies among the Sisters?"

"Not one. We are all to be happy alike."

"That is as it should be," said Desdemona; "and that is the true end of the Abbey of Thelema."

"Only we are sorry for poor Tom, and for Miranda, and for Alan. We had hoped that Miranda——"

"Alan is not married yet," said Desdemona.

Meantime, Nelly observed that her partner was feverishly excited and nervous. His performance in the dance was far below his usual form, and for the first time since she had made his acquaintance he was not smiling. That looked ominous.

"I have been," he whispered, in agitated accents, when the dance was finished—"I have been in the Garden of Eden for three months, thanks to you. Let me have a quarter of an hour alone with you to-morrow. Can it be that I am to take a farewell at the gates of Paradise?"

"I will meet you in the breakfast-room at noon, to-morrow," said Nelly quietly.

Farewell at the gates of Paradise? Was the man really beginning to affect that self-depreciation which to girls not in love seems so absurd, and to girls who are in love is so delightful? He could not be in love as Tom was—not in that fond, foolish way at least; there would be no sentiment, she said to herself, on either side. Then why begin with nonsense about farewell?

Certainly there would be no sentiment; she would accept him, of course, as she had told Tom all along. It would be a bargain between them; he would have a wife of whom Nelly was quite certain he would be proud; she would get as good a house as she wanted, a husband *comme il faut*, an establishment of the kind to which she aspired in her most sensible moments, and a husband who had his good points and was amusing. It would have been better, doubtless, to have a Tom Caledon, with whom one could quarrel and make it up again, whom one could trust altogether and tell everything to, who would look after one if there was any trouble.

But, after all, a real society husband, a life of society with people of society, must be the best in the long-run. Nelly felt that she should look well at her own table and in her own drawing-room; her husband would talk cleverly; she would be tranquilly and completely happy. And as for Tom, why of course he would very soon forget her, and find somebody else—she hoped with money to keep him going. Poor Tom!

A life in the world against a human life; a sequence of colourless years against the sweet alternations of cloud and sunshine, mist and clear sky, which go with a marriage for love; a following of seasons, in which, year after year, social success grows to seem a less desirable thing, against the blessed recurrence of times sacred to all sorts of tender memories—was this the thing which Nelly had desired, and was going to accept, consciously?

I suppose it was her mother's teaching, whose book was

"The eleventh commandment,
Which says, 'Thou shalt not marry unless well.'"

That sweet womanly side of her character—the readiness to love and be loved—had been brought out by Tom, and yet it seemed, as an active force, powerless against the instructions of her childhood. It had been awakened by one brief erratic ramble into the realm of Nature—that evening on Ryde pier—after which poor Nelly thought she had returned to the dominion of common sense. She hid nothing from Tom; she was as confiding as Virginia to Paul; but it did not occur to her that her decision, now that a decision was left to her, could possibly be other than that indicated by her mother.

She said that it was Fate. Just as the charity boy knows that it is perfectly useless, as well as unchristian, to envy the Prince who rides past him on his own pony, so the girl, Nelly, had learned, who has no *dot* may as well make up her mind at once that she cannot hope to follow the natural inclinations of her heart, and choose her own husband for herself. She must wait to be chosen, in this Babylonian marriage market, by the rich.

As for the other Sisters of the Abbey, they were all portioned, and could do as they pleased. Therefore Nelly looked with eyes of natural envy on this Sister, who could listen to the suit of a penniless officer; and on that, who, rich herself, was going to take for better or for worse, and oh! how very much for better, a love-sick youth richer than herself. For them, the life of pleasantness, the life of which we all dream, the life which is not rendered sordid by money cares, and mean by debts, and paltry in being bound and cabined by the iron walls of necessity, the life of ease had been attained. Men work for it; giving it to wives and daughters by early rising, late lying down, burning the candle at both ends, and dying at fifty. Is their lot worse than that of women who, to obtain it, marry, and faithfully observe the covenant of marriage with men whom, under other circumstances, they would not have preferred?

Nelly would have preferred Tom. There was no doubt about that, none. But if she could not marry Tom, being so very much enamoured of the paths of pleasantness, why, then, she must marry Mr. Exton; and he seemed a cheerful creature, full of admiration of her, and, doubtless, in his way, which was very unlike the way of Tom, in love with her.

Perhaps as Nelly laid her fair head upon the pillow that night her thoughts took up some sad, defensive attitude. But her pulse beat no faster, and her sleep was not broken by the thought of the morrow.

The pleasant breakfast-room, which looked upon the inner court of the Abbey, was quite deserted at noon, when Nelly arrived to keep her appointment. Mr. Exton did not keep her waiting.

She sat down before a window, and waited, with a little flush upon her cheek.

"How pretty you are!" sighed Brother Peregrine.

His eyes were more curiously crowsfooted than ever, and they had the strangest look in them—a look the meaning of which was difficult to make out.

Somehow, Nelly thought there was some sort of shame in them, only Brother Peregrine was surely the last person in the world to manifest that sort of emotion. Besides, what was there to be ashamed of?

"I think that you are growing prettier every day."

His face, covered with its multitudinous crows'-feet, seemed forced into a smile; but there was no mirth in his eyes. He had said much the same sort of thing a good many times before, but had never got beyond that kind of general statement.

"Do you think it altogether right," asked Nelly, looking him straight in the face, "to say that sort of thing?"

"But that wasn't what I wanted to say," said the Brother, with considerable hesitation. "I—I—I am going to leave the Abbey to-day. I have just written a letter of farewell to the Order, and sent it to Desdemona——"

"Going to leave the Abbey, and why?"

"Because I must," he replied gloomily. "Because, although these limbs seem free, I wear the chains of slavery. Because I am called away."

This was a very mysterious beginning.

"You talk as if you were going to the end of the world."

"I wish I were. But I am only going to London."

"Is that such a very dreadful place? To be sure, at this time of year, there will be nobody to talk to."

"I have had—the—the most DELIGHTFUL time," Brother Peregrine went on, nervously; "and entirely through you. I shall never, certainly never, forget the walks, and drives, and talks you have given me. They have left the most charming recollection in my mind. I do not believe there is a sweeter girl than yourself in all the world—alas!"

He heaved the most melancholy sigh.

What *could* he mean? Leave recollections in his mind? Then, after all, he was not, perhaps, going to——

Nelly sat quite silent. Her cheeks had grown pale suddenly, and in her head were a dozen thoughts battling to take shape in her brain.

"Will you remember me, with a little regret?" he asked. "To be sure I cannot ask for more—a man in my awful position ought not to ask for so much——"

"When you explain yourself," said Nelly; "when I understand what your awful position is, I shall be better able to talk to you."

"I have told you I am sent for."

"Who has sent for you?"

"My wife," he replied, simply.

His wife!

"She has just arrived from India, with all the children. She is at the Langham Hotel. She writes to me that unless I go to her at once, she will come to me."

Nelly gazed at him with eyes of wonder. The man was shaking and trembling.

"You don't quite understand what that means," he went on. "Perhaps when I tell you that my wife is a—a—Eurasian, in fact, with more of the tar than of the lily in her complexion, and that the children take after their mother in complexion and temper, you may begin to understand that I was not particularly anxious to talk about my marriage."

"And so you pretended to be an unmarried man," said Nelly, a little bitterly.

"No one ever asked me if I was married," he said. "If they had, I dare say I should have confessed. She is much older than myself, and she has a temper. She is also jealous. Very jealous she is. The children have tempers, too, and have been spoiled by their mother. They are not pleasant children at all"

"Was this all you had to say to me?"

Nelly rose and stood at the window.

"Yes, I think so. Just to thank you for your kindness, and to express a hope that you will not forget this summer."

"No, I am not likely to forget this summer," she replied, with a touch of bitterness in her tone; "not at all likely. Nor shall I readily forget you, Mr. Exton."

"Your advocate in the great case of Lancelot *versus* Rosalind," he said. "You will remember me by that, you know."

"I shall remember you," she said, "without thinking of the *Cour d'Amour.* And now, good-bye."

She held out her hand coldly. He bent over it, and would have kissed it, but she drew it back.

"No, Mr. Exton. Think of your wife. By the way, you are going to London? Mamma is, I believe, in town for a few days. Will you call upon her? She would like to make Mrs. Exton's acquaintance, I am sure. She might tell Mrs. Exton, too, more than you would be likely to remember about the Abbey of Thelema. Mamma's address is No. 81, Chester Square. You will be sure to call, will you not? Good-bye. I am sorry to hear that you are——"

"Married?" he asked.

"No, not at all. . . . I am glad to hear that your wife has arrived. Husband and wife ought to be together. I am only sorry that we shall lose you. I can write to mamma, then, that you will call upon her to-morrow. It is No. 81, Chester Square. Do not forget. Good-bye, Mr. Exton."

With these words, the sting of which he hardly comprehended, but which, as Nelly intended, he would discover when that call was actually made, she left him, and, without looking to right or left, mounted the stairs and sought the privacy of her own cell.

There she sat down, and, with pale cheek and hardened eyes, tried to understand the position of things. She was bitterly humiliated; she was ashamed; angry with her mother, angry with herself, fiercely angry with the man who had played with and deceived her. How could she face the Sisters, all of them in the possession of a suitor about whom there was no mystery and no deception? Should she tell the whole story to everybody? Would it not be better to go on and make no sign? But some one she must tell. Desdemona would hear her story with sympathy; so would Miranda; so would . . . . and here there came a knock at her door. It was no other than Tom Caledon.

"Your reception-morning, Nell," he said awkwardly. "I come as a simple caller. But what is it, Nelly? You look pale. Has that fellow Exton—has he——"

"He has said good-bye to me, Tom."

"What? You have refused him, then? Oh! Nell, tell me."

"No, Tom, it is worse than that. I went prepared to accept him . . . . and he did not . . . make the offer I expected. He is gone, Tom."

"Has the fellow been playing all the time, then?"

"Not quite. I think he has been enjoying himself in his own way, without thinking how he might compromise me. But he is a married man, Tom. That is all. A married man. And his wife has ordered him home."

"A married man?"

"He says so. About such a trifle"—she laughed bitterly—"men do not generally tell lies, I suppose. He spoke very prettily about my kindness; and so I asked him, out of pure gratitude, Tom, to go to Chester Square and call upon mamma."

Tom stared blankly.

"Then he has imposed upon all of us."

"That does not matter, Tom. I am the only person to be pitied—or blamed. I, who have been allowed to stay down here on the condition that I was to—to throw myself in his way, to attract him, to please him, to court him if necessary. I, who was to pose before him like a dancing girl, to listen to his idle talk, always to be pleasant to him. Oh! it is shameful—it is shameful!"

She stamped her little foot and wrung her hands, and the tears came into her eyes.

"I never thought before what it was like—this angling for rich men. What must they think of us? What can you think of me, Tom?"

"You know very well what I think of you, Nelly."

"Now I must go back to town, and it will all begin over again, as soon as mamma has found some one else. Go away, Tom; don't think of me any more. I am only an adventuress. I am unworthy that you should be kind to me. I shall leave this sweet place, with all the Brothers and Sisters, and dear Miranda and Desdemona—oh! the beautiful home of rest—

and go back again to the world, and fight among other adventuresses."

"No, Nelly, no," cried Tom. And while she sank her head into her hands his arms were round her. "No, Nelly, darling. I will not let you. Stay here; stay with me, and we will take our chance. Never mind the world, Nell; we will give up the things that only rich people can do. Stay with me, my darling."

"Oh! Tom—Tom—will you take me? And now?—you ought to have more self-respect, Tom: now—after all that is passed?"

"This is real happiness, Tom," she said, looking up in his face, with her full, deep eyes. "There can be no happiness like this."

And so passed half-an-hour.

Then Nelly said that they must come back to the world, and that meant punishing Mr. Exton, in the first place.

"As I have sent him to call upon mamma," she said, "I must prepare mamma's mind for his visit."

She wrote the shortest of letters.

"DEAR MAMMA,

"Mr. Exton will call upon you to-morrow. I hope you will be at home.

"Your affectionate daughter,
"ELEANOR."

"There, Tom!" she said, with a mischievous light in her eye. "You see, that commits me to nothing, and it will lead mamma to think a great deal. The explosion, when she finds out, will be like a torpedo. I really think that I have punished poor Brother Peregrine enough."

This business despatched, Tom began upon another.

"Nelly," he said, "will you do exactly what I ask you?"

"Exactly, Tom," she said.

"No one, not even Desdemona, is to know it."

"No one, Tom."

Then he whispered in her ear for a few minutes. First she stared at him with all her eyes; then she blushed; then she laughed; and then she trembled.

"Oh! Tom, it is delightful. But what *will* mamma say?"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"Can these things be? or are visions about?"

IT was on Thursday afternoon that Miranda asked Mr. Rondelet to meet her in Desdemona's cell.

He came with a curious sense of agitation. It was hardly possible that she should refuse him; and yet—why had she not accepted him at once? What need to deliberate for four and twenty hours over what might just as well have been decided on the spot? Perhaps, however, it was the way of young ladies, a class with whom Paul Rondelet, in spite of his monastic vows, had but little sympathy.

Had he overheard the conversation which took place between Desdemona and Miranda, he would have been more agitated.

"No," Miranda was saying. "You need not be in the least alarmed, Desdemona, I am not going to hold out any hopes. And this, I trust"—she heaved a deep sigh—"will be the last of my courtiers."

Desdemona lifted her great soft eyes lazily: she was lying, as usual, in her comfortable *chaise longue*, with a few costume designs in her lap, and laughed noiselessly.

"I should have dismissed him on the spot," Miranda went on, "but his condescension and conceit were so amazing that they irritated me. It is an ignoble thing to confess, but I longed to box his ears."

"My dear Miranda," said Desdemona, "I sincerely wish you had. Most young men, and especially young men of Advanced Thought, would be all the better for a box on the ears."

And just then the candidate for her hand and fortune appeared.

He was elaborately got up: a studied simplicity reigned in his neat and faultless dress, his grey kid gloves, the hat which was not too new and yet not shabby, the plain black silk ribbon which did duty for a tie. Even his smooth cheeks, his tiny moustache, his dark hair parted down the middle with an ambrosial curl, half an inch long over his white brow, spoke of quintessential taste.

"Pray sit down, Mr. Rondelet," said Desdemona the hostess. "Take the chair nearest the china. I know it soothes you to be near blue china. Miranda has asked me to be present, if you do not object."

"Miss Dalmeny's wishes are commands," he said, feeling more uneasy. But perhaps she was going to take him at his word and enter upon a betrothal with the calm which marks the truly philosophic spirit. After all she *would* be worthy of him.

"I have been thinking, Mr. Rondelet," said Miranda slowly, turning a paper-knife between her fingers, and looking at her suitor with more of a critical eye than he liked to see. It is all very well to be a critic, but no critic likes to be criticised. She was looking, too, calm and self-possessed, as if she was perfectly mistress of the situation. "I have been thinking over what you said. You assumed, you may remember, as a ground for your request, a superiority over the ordinary run of educated men—over our Monks of Thelema, for instance. But I have reflected, however, that I was asked to take that on your own assurance. Would you mind telling me how you can prove this superiority?"

Proof? Proof of his superiority? Paul Rondelet dropped his eye-glass and drew a long breath of amazement. Then he put it up again, and flushed a rosy red. Did she actually want him to bring testimonials, like a candidate for a place?

"I am Paul Rondelet," he said proudly—"Paul Rondelet of Lothian. I should have thought that was enough."

"We live here," said Miranda, "so far from Oxford, and are so little connected with the circles where people think, that I am afraid I must ask you for a little more information." Her voice was steady and her manner calm, but in her eyes there was a light which boded ill for her suitor. "I have no doubt at all that you are incontestably in the front. Only I should like to know how you got there."

Paul Rondelet was silent. This was an awkward turn of things. What reply could he make?

"For instance," Miranda went on pitilessly, "have you written works of scholarship?"

"No," said Paul, very red and uneasy, "I leave grammar to schoolmasters."

"Then there is Art," she continued. "The women of your higher levels, you say, are to possess an instinctive love for Art, but are to be trained by the men. Do you paint?"

Paul Rondelet, whose lips were very dry by this time, and his hands trembling, shook his head. He did not paint.

"Then how could you train me, supposing I possessed this instinct?"

"I should instruct you on the principles of Art and its highest expression," said the superior youth.

"Yes—yes. You would show me beautiful pictures. But I have already, we will suppose, the instinct of Art, and could find them out for myself. And all that you could tell me I have in my library already."

"The new school, the Higher School," he interrupted pleadingly, "requires its own language to express its new teaching."

"I know," she said, "I have translated some of the language of the New School into English, and I find its disciples to be on no higher a level, as I think, than my old authorities. I have Ruskin, at least, whom I can understand. And Eastlake, and Wornum, and Jameson, and old Sir Joshua. However, there are other things. You have written novels, perhaps?"

He shuddered Could a man of his standing condescend to write a novel, to pander to the taste of the vulgar herd who read such things?

"You are a dramatist, then?"

"The British Drama is dead," he replied in a hollow voice.

"Perhaps it is only sleeping. Perhaps some day a man will awaken it," she said. "But there is poetry; we know that you write verses. Are you a poet acknowledged by the world?"

This was dreadful. He had published nothing. And yet there were those little poems, which his friends carried in their bosoms, over which he had spent so many hours. But most certainly he could not show these to a lady so little advanced in the principles of his school.

"Then, Mr. Rondelet," said Miranda, "I am at a loss to know on what grounds your claims for superiority rest."

This was a decisive question. It demanded decision. But Rondelet rose from the chair in which he had endured this cross-examination with as much dignity as he could assume. Standing gives a speaker a certain advantage.

"I will endeavour to explain," he said.

"Oh! Miranda," cooed Desdemona in the softest and most sympathetic of murmurs. "Mr. Rondelet will explain. Oh yes; one always declared that he was really a superior man. One felt that if you wanted to know anything, you only had to ask him. How charming of him to explain!"

But Paul Rondelet thought he detected the faintest possible sarcasm in her accents, and he hated Desdemona for the moment with a hate inextinguishable.

"You have placed me, doubtless unintentionally, in an exceedingly difficult position," he said, with an artificial smile. "Such a superiority as you imagine, Miss Dalmeny, I did not claim. You misunderstood me."

"Oh! Miranda," purred Desdemona. "You misunderstood him."

"What I meant was this," he said. "I belong to the school which possesses the Higher Criticism."

"Oh!" said Desdemona, clasping her hands.

Paul Rondelet began to hate this woman worse than ever.

"Our standard of Art is different from, and far above, that recognised by the world; we have our own canons; we write for each other in our own language; we speak for each other. It is not our business to produce, but if we do produce, it is after many years of thought, and whether it is only a small essay, or a single sheaf of sonnets, it is a production which marks an epoch in the development of Art."

"Are there many of these productions yet before the world?" pursued Miranda.

"As yet, none. Some are carried about by ourselves for our own delight."

Miranda put down her paper-knife. Her face was quite hard and stern.

"You are a critic. Really, Mr. Rondelet, I never before heard so singular a proposal. You offer me, in return for my hand, to impart to me—the Higher Criticism."

Looked at in this cold, passionless way, the proposal did not indeed appear attractive even to the proposer.

"What else can you give me, Mr. Rondelet, beside the cold air of the Higher Levels? Do you love me?"

She asked this question in a business-like manner, which was at the same time most irritating. Never before in all his life had Paul Rondelet felt himself ridiculous.

"I thought," he said, "that you were superior to the vulgar . . . . . the vulgar . . . . ."

Here Miranda interrupted him.

"The vulgar desire of being loved by my husband? Not at all, Mr. Rondelet, I assure you. I should, on the other hand, expect it."

"In the common sense of the word," he went on stammering. "I suppose—— But it is impossible for a man of my school to affect more than the esteem which one cultivated mind feels for another."

"I am glad you have told me the exact truth," she said. "One likes to find respect for the truth even on your height. But tell me more, Mr. Rondelet. Do you wish to marry me only because you esteem me, or is there any other motive?"

He hesitated, dropped his eye-glass, blushed, and lost his head altogether. At this moment, standing limp and shattered before his interrogator, Paul Rondelet of Lothian looked like a guilty schoolboy.

"Are you rich, Mr. Rondelet?"

"I—I—I am not," he replied.

"You have your Fellowship, I believe. Is that all?"

"That is all," said Paul Rondelet.

He felt more limp, more like a guilty schoolboy, as he answered these questions.

"And when that ceases, you will have nothing. I heard from Alan that it would cease in a few months."

"Yes," said Paul Rondelet.

"And after?"

"I do not know."

"Do you think it worthy of a member of your school to look on marriage as a means of maintaining himself in ease?"

"It is not that," he replied eagerly—"not that—I mean—not

—altogether that. It is true that—in fact—any man might look forward to—to——"

"Come, Mr. Rondelet," said Miranda, "I am sure this conversation is painful to you. Let us stop. As for my answer, you may readily guess it."

He hung his head, and tried in vain to put up his eye-glass.

"Let us be friends, Mr. Rondelet," she went on, holding out her hand.

He took it feebly.

"You will yet show the world that you have ability apart from the—the Higher Criticism, I am sure. Besides, a leader ought to teach."

"That is not our creed," murmured Paul Rondelet, trying to reassert himself; "we live our own life to ourselves. Let others see it, and imitate us if they can."

"But how, with no income, will you live the life? Can criticism, even of the highest, provide you with what you have taught yourself to consider necessaries? Must you not think how you will live any life at all?"

"I do not know," groaned the unfortunate man.

"Will you write for the papers?"

He shuddered.

"Am I to give *my* thoughts to the vulgar herd to read over their breakfast?"

It was no use being angry with the man. His conceit was sublime. But Miranda spoke with impatience.

"There is no common herd. We are all men and women together. Believe me, Mr. Rondelet, you have lived too long in Oxford. The air of Lothian College is unwholesome. Go out of it at once, and fight among the rest, and do your little to help the world along. God knows we want all the help we can get."

He only stared in a helpless way.

"Your level?" she asked, with a little laugh. "You will find it where you find your strength. Perhaps, some day, when other people are ready to place you above them, you will be ashamed of ever thinking yourself on a higher level than the rest. Your school? That is a paltry and a selfish school which begins with scorn for the ignorant. The common herd?"—she stamped her foot with impatience—"why, we are all one common herd together: some richer, some poorer, and some a little stronger. And there is only one hope for the world, that men and women help each other, as Alan Dunlop has set himself to help his people."

The tears came into her eyes for a moment, but she brushed them away, and made a gesture of dismissal. The crushed Fellow of Lothian obeyed the gesture, and without a word withdrew.

Miranda remained where she stood for a few moments, silent, tearful.

"I compared him with Alan," she said. "Oh! the *little* creature that he showed beside our glorious Alan!"

"You are a queen, Miranda," said Desdemona, "and Alan is——"

"What is Alan?" she asked, with a little laugh.

"He is Hamlet, Prince of Denmark."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"Sinful brother, part in peace."

On that Thursday evening when Refectory bell rang, it was discovered that no fewer than four of the Brothers were absent, an event remarkable in the chronicles of the Abbey.

Alan Dunlop, who, during this week, his last of celibacy, naturally devoted his evenings entirely to his bride, was one. His father was present, however—no unworthy substitute. Tom Caledon was absent too. Where was Tom?

Everybody quite naturally looked to Nelly.

"Tom has gone to town on business," said Nelly, quietly.

Then, without any apparent reason, she blushed deeply, so that the monastic fraternity smiled.

Mr. Paul Rondelet was absent. The reason of this was that he was perfecting a grand scheme which he proposed to lay before Alan immediately. Also, his interest in the Abbey had greatly diminished since Miranda's few plain words.

And where was Brother Peregrine—the man who had been so useful in keeping things going, who had been everywhere at once, and was Desdemona's right-hand man for invention, as Tom Caledon had been for execution? Where was Brother Peregrine, who had been for three months the devoted follower of Nelly? Had she refused him?

"After dinner," said Desdemona, "I will tell you what has become of Brother Peregrine."

"I have," she said, when the inner man had been refreshed, and there was nothing on the table but claret and fruit—"I have to read a very sad letter. The Order of Thelema has been imposed upon. You will all be sorry to learn that Brother Peregrine has traded upon our credulity, and intruded himself upon us under false pretences."

There was considerable sensation. Desdemona, with the deliberation acquired on the stage, proceeded slowly to unfold a letter and lay it open. You know how they do it: a quick movement of the hand breaks the seal; a look up to the first circle expresses expectation, terror, or joy; the letter is torn from the envelope; that is thrown to the ground; both hands are used to unfold it, and one smooths it out. Then, with another glance, but at the pit this time, the letter is brought to the focus of the eye and read slowly.

That is the stage method. Desdemona could not help adopting it under the present circumstances. She read it with a running commentary:

"'Dear Sister Desdemona'—he has the audacity to call me sister after what has happened!—'For the last time, before laying aside the monastic garb, which I never ought to have assumed, I venture to address you by a title under which you will always be remembered by me'—I dare say he will remember all of us by our monastic names—the wretch!—'I am not, I confess with shame, legally entitled to the status and position under the pretence of which I took your vows. By the statutes, the Abbey receives none but the unmarried'"—here there was a general movement of surprise—"'except in your own case'—and I am a widow," said Desdemona.—"'Such an exception I knew could not be made in my own case; it would have been idle to ask or expect it. And yet the truth was, and is, that I have the misfortune of being a married man.'"

There was a profound sensation. One or two laughed—they were of the masculine order. The Sisters looked indignant. Cecilia said it was shameful, and asked what punishment could be inflicted on such a monk.

"He is not only a false pretender," she cried, "but he is unfaithful to his vows, because he derides the state of matrimony."

Then Nelly's sweet voice was lifted up, and everybody felt that she had a special right to be heard.

"Yes," she said, "it is quite true. He told me so himself this morning. You all thought he was paying his addresses to me. So did I. So did Tom. It made him jealous."

"Yes," said Miranda, "we all know that. But can we punish him, and how?"

"I have punished him already," said Nelly.

She blushed, and kept her eyes on her plate.

"I think you will all understand when I tell you that I have made him promise to call upon mamma," she murmured. "He will call to-morrow morning."

They looked at one another and smiled. Everybody at once concluded that things would be made unpleasant for this sinful Brother.

Then Desdemona went on reading the letter:

"'I have the misfortune of being a married man. My wife and children, whom I left in India, her native country, have now arrived, and are at the Langham Hotel. She has found out my address, most unfortunately, and writes me word that unless I return to London instantly, she will come down here. To spare the Order a visit from that lady, I am on the point of returning to town without loss of time.

"'Will you kindly assure the Fraternity that, while I feel that nothing can possibly excuse my conduct, I shall always rejoice in the deception which enabled me to enjoy three most delightful months? The Sisters are more charming than, with my unfortunate experience, seemed possible for ladies; wedlock under such circumstances would not, I feel convinced—— but I have no right to speak of such things. If they are disposed to be angry with me, they may perhaps reflect upon my situation, and accord me their pity.

"I bid farewell to the Abbey with the deepest regret. As my wife proposes to remain in England for the education of her children, I shall return to India immediately. Indeed, I have already taken steps, by means of the Submarine Telegraph Company, to ensure the reception of an urgent message calling me back by the next boat, to look after my estates. I shall therefore reside in Assam until my family shall have completed their education, and, with their mother, return to India. I hope, then, to get back to England. I may explain, if anybody is curious about my history, that the plantation is very large and lucrative, and that it was originally her own.

"'Your sorrowful and afflicted Brother,

"'PEREGRINE.'"

A Resolution was passed that Brother Peregrine's name should be erased without further delay from the list of the Fraternity; and that he should no more be mentioned in any of their Functions or Rejoicings. But there was some sympathy expressed; and, perhaps, had the Brother pleaded his own defence in person, he might have obtained forgiveness.

But there would be few more Functions. The end of the Abbey—of this particular branch of the Order of Thelema—was rapidly approaching, though no one realised it except Desdemona.

In all the histories of human communities which I have read, this of the Abbey of Thelema is the only one in which petty jealousies, ambitions, and desire to rule have found no place. Miranda was absolute Queen; Desdemona was Prime Minister, or First Vizier; she was also Directress of Ceremonies. Alan, by universal consent, acted as Orator; while Brother Bayard, the stately, was with equal unanimity appointed Herald, when ever a splendid person of that description was required. There were no committees, no governing bodies, no elections, nothing to raise ambitious hopes or revolutionary designs.

It would be worth the while of Club Committees to imitate the constitution of the Abbey. There must be some clubs where more is thought of the candidate himself than of his subscription. In the Abbey of Thelema were none of those who disturb and vex club life—among those who talked were neither down-criers, nor slanderers, nor stabbers in the back; none were jealous one of the other—none were anxious that his neighbour should fail—there were no petty ambitions—there was no talk of money or desire of κῦδος. Could we get such a club in London—could we keep it in its original purity—could we ensure the retirement of a discordant member—we should call into existence the means of making the most despondent of philosophers find joy in life.

"It is a delightful place, Desdemona," said Lord Alwyne; "but, unless an experienced eye is wrong, there will shortly be many changes. They go when they marry, do they not, your Brothers and Sisters?"

"Alas! yes," sighed Desdemona. "The Monastic vows do not contemplate continued residence. And the wedding ring takes a Sister into the outer world."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"Hic est aüt nusquam quod quærimus."

Mr. Paul Rondelet was refused, with a plainness of speech which left no room for doubt. He was indignant, he was humiliated; but it was absurd to suppose that the ignorance of a girl was to make him disbelieve in himself. Not at all. What he was before Miranda treated him with such unworthy estimate, such he was still. Was he, Paul Rondelet of Lothian, to be cast down because Miss Dalmeny, a mere country girl, did not know who and what he was? Certainly not; he was saddened, naturally.

Perhaps he had thought that his reputation extended even to so low a stratum of culture as that of the Abbey; perhaps he had hoped that the name of Rondelet was known in wider circles. It was a pity, a grievous pity, he thought. He might have made a charming home, on the newest principles, of Dalmeny Hall; he was eminently a man to grace, as it had never before been graced, the position of country squire; and that might have been his position had Miranda taken him on his own estimate, without wanting to measure him by the ordinary standards of what he had done. What he had done, indeed! What he had thought, would have been the proper question. But until Research is endowed, he felt, with sadness, men like himself have no proper chance.

Meantime, he set to work with vigour to elaborate an idea which was at once to ensure his immortality and to prove his greatness. No doubt, there was a touch of *rancune*, a desire to show Miranda what kind of man she had contemptuously refused. He dined in his own cell, read over his scheme by the rosy light of a bottle of Château Laffitte, gave it the finishing touches, and at nine o'clock sallied forth, manuscript in pocket, in search of Alan Dunlop.

His idea was based, financially speaking, on the grand fact that Alan was rich. Rich men are needful for the help of those who are poor. To submit an idea to a rich man, provided he be capable of receiving an idea, is to do him the great service of making him use his wealth. Alan was eminently receptive of ideas. And Paul Rondelet marvelled that he had neglected to *exploiter* this wealthy mine during so many years. His own disciple, almost—his admirer, always—one who believed in him—it was absurd to think of going out into poverty with Alan at his back.

He made his way to the Shepherd Squire's comfortless cottage, and waited there for his arrival.

Nothing was changed in the cottage since that first day when Alan went to sleep by the fire, and awoke to find his breakfast stolen. There was the wooden chair beside the deal table, the shelf of books, the stack of papers, the cupboard door open, showing the common china and the materials for making tea, bread and butter, and other simple accessories of a hermit's life. The kettle was on the hob, though the fire was not lit; and a couple of candlesticks stood upon the mantelshelf.

Paul Rondelet lit the candles, sat, and waited. This cottage life, he remembered, was one of the dreams of a certain stage in his own development. He thought how, in their ardent youth, they had taken their claret in Alan's rooms, which looked over the stately college gardens, and discussed the life of self-sacrifice which was to regenerate the world. There were a dozen who formed their little set of theorists. Out of them all one alone was found to carry theories into practice, and realise a dream. What about himself? What about the rest? It was not enough to say that they were men who had to make an income for themselves. He could no longer comprehend the attitude of mind which made such a dream as that former one possible. He had grown out of it, he said. He had sunk beneath it, conscience whispered; but then the Advanced School does not believe in conscience. And the rest? They were all at work: practising at the Bar, writing, teaching, even —melancholy thought!—curates and parish priests.

What he could no longer understand was the nobleness of the nature which thus simply converted theory into practice, and became what the others only talked about. What he failed to see was, that, living in slothful ease, which he mistook for intellectual activity, he had lost the power to conceive any more, far less to execute, the noble dreams of his youth.

He sat and wondered. Six years before, his heart would have burned within him, and his spirit would have mounted upwards, to join that of Alan Dunlop. Now he only wondered.

Presently Alan came. His manner was listless, his face was haggard. Alma had been more than usually unreceptive that evening. She had been sulky; she had returned rude and short answers; she had tried his patience almost beyond his strength. His father, too, he had learned, was at the Abbey, and he did not dare go to see him, lest in his tell-tale face, or by his tell-tale tongue, it should be discovered that he had made a great and terrible mistake, beyond the power of an honourable man to alter.

"You here, Rondelet?"

"Yes, I have been waiting for you. Let us have a talk, Alan."

Paul Rondelet produced his roll of papers, while Alan, with rather a weary sigh, took down a pipe from the mantle-shelf, filled it, and sat listlessly on his deal table.

"Go on, Rondelet; I am listening."

Paul Rondelet began, with a little nervousness unusual to him, to expound his project. Had Alan cared to read between the lines, his speech would have been as follows:

"I am driven to the necessity of doing something for myself; in a few months I shall have no income. I can find no way of fighting as men generally do fight. I can discern no likely popularity in what will fall from my pen. I want to get, somehow or other, endowment. You are a very rich man. You shall endow me."

What he really said at the finish was this:

"I will leave the Prospectus with you. I shall be able to find a publisher—on commission—easily. It is a crying shame that a magazine purely devoted to the followers of the Higher Culture does not exist."

"There are the *Contemporary*, the *Fortnightly*, the *Nineteenth Century*."

"My dear Dunlop!"—he held up his hands—"pray do not think that we are going to occupy *that* level. We shall have none but our own circle as readers, writers, and supporters."

"Will you depend on names?"

"On some names, yes. Not on the names of ex-Premiers; only on the names of those who are men of mark among ourselves."

"But—do you think it will pay?"

"Not at first, I suppose—eventually. And that brings me to the next point. I have drawn up a note of expenses. I put myself down as editor, with eight hundred pounds a year. You do not think that excessive, Dunlop?"

"Surely not, for a man of your calibre."

"The rest of the estimate you can go into at your leisure. I want you, as the most advanced of our wealthy men, to guarantee—to guarantee," he repeated, with an anxious flush of his cheek, "not to give, the expenses of the first year. Whatever loss there may be, if any, will be repaid from the subsequent profits."

Alan received this proposition in silence. Only he stroked his beard and pulled at his pipe. His domestic experiments had already cost him so much that he was loath to incur fresh responsibilities.

"To guarantee, not to give," repeated Paul Rondelet, glancing at his face uneasily. "Consider," he went on. "We, who set an example in our lives, should also set an example in our writings. It is not preaching that we want, but the acted life." That was just what Alan, in a different way, had always maintained. "Let the lower herd, the crowd, see how we live, read what we write, and learn what we think."

"Y-yes," said Alan doubtfully; "and the probable amount of the guarantee—what one might be asked to pay, month by month?"

"That," said Mr. Rondelet, airily, "is impossible for me to say. Perhaps a thousand in the course of the year. Perhaps a little more. We shall have, of course, a great quantity of advertisements to fall back upon. I have no doubt that we shall rapidly acquire a circulation. People want guidance: we shall guide them: they want to know what to think—we shall formulate their thoughts: what to read—we shall publish a list of selected articles."

"That sounds possible," said Alan, softening.

"You and I, my dear Alan," went on the tempter, "will be registered joint proprietors. You shall find the money: I will find the staff. You shall start us: I will be the editor. And we will share the profits."

"Yes. I was to share the profits of my farm; but there are none."

"There will be, in this magazine. Fancy a monthly journal without a trace of Philistinism in it. Positively no habitant of the Low Country allowed to write in it. The Higher Thought demands a style of its own. There have been articles, I own, in the *Fortnightly*, especially written by members of our own school, which none but ourselves could possibly understand. Picture to yourself a paper absolutely unintelligible save to the disciples of the New School. As for the other things, what can be expected from magazines which allow Bishops, Deans, Professors, and people of that sort to contribute ?"

Paul Rondelet shook his head sadly, as if the lowest depth must be reached when you come to Bishops. Alan was shaken, but not convinced. Sitting as he was among the ruins of his own schemes, he was naturally not anxious to promote new ones. And yet, the old influence of Paul Rondelet was over him still. He still believed that this man was a power. The first and the lifelong heroes are those of school and college. It is sad, indeed, when chance brings one face to face, in after years, with the great and gallant Captain of the school, to find that he is, after all, no greater than yourself, and, in fact, rather a mean sort of person. Next to the school hero comes he who was a hero among undergraduates. Alan believed formerly in that bright, clever, and conceited scholar who assumed every kind of knowledge, and talked like a Socrates. It was difficult not to believe in him still. He reflected that this would be his chance : he thought that it would be a great thing to let Rondelet prove his greatness to the outer world.

"I will guarantee the expense," he said at last, "for one year."

Paul Rondelet, shortly afterwards, stepped out of his Fellowship with ease of mind. The magazine was started.

It was exactly a year ago. It ran for nearly a year ; it contained the Poem of the Sorrowful Young Man ; The Sonnet to Burne Jones ; papers by Paul Rondelet on the Orphic Myth, on the Bishops of the Renaissance, on certain obscure French poets, on the Modern School of English Painting, on the Italian Women of the Fifteenth Century, on the Fall of the Church, and other papers. Nobody except "the Circle" bought that magazine ; nobody advertised in it. And after ten months, for very shame, the publishers advised Mr. Dunlop to pay the editor his salary for the year and stop it. Paul Rondelet now writes for the Daily Press. He contributes leaders to a penny paper. He glories in this occupation. It is not writing for the common herd any longer ; it is "swaying the masses." His articles may be known by frequent quotations, not from the poets loved by the world, but from modern writers, such as Morris and Rossetti ; by references to French writers not generally known to mankind, such as Catulle Mendes, Baudelaire, and Theodore de Banville ; by the easy omniscience which is at home among pre-historic men, or among the scholars of the Renaissance or with the Darwinians; by an absolute inability to enter with sympathy into any phase of real life; and by an irrepressible tone of superiority. Whatever he says, this writer is always Paul Rondelet of Lothian.

CHAPTER XL.

> "Now the nights are all passed over
> Of our dreaming, dreams that hover
> In a mist of fair, false things,
> Nights afloat on wide wan wings."

THE day before the wedding.

In his two-roomed cottage, Alan awoke with the feeling of gratitude that he should only have one more night in that uncomfortable lean-to. The house which he had decided on occupying contained four rooms, and they were larger.

It was meant as a surprise for Alma: the furniture was ordered and ready, waiting to be sent down: it was the furniture of the Future: it came from an establishment recently started by two young ladies, one of whom was a distinguished *alumnus* of Girton. They had solemn eyes and touzly hair, and dressed to match their green and grey papers.

"I want furniture," said Alan, a little overwhelmed at being received by two figures which looked as if they had stepped straight down from the walls of the Grosvenor; "I want cottage furniture, which shall be beautiful as well as fit for its purpose."

"Furniture," suggested one, "which shall be a model and a lesson."

"Furniture," echoed the other lady-upholsterer, "which shall be in harmony, not in contrast, with woodland nature."

"And it ought to be cheap," said Alan, "if it is to represent the ideal cottage furniture."

This suggestion, however, met with no response. The two-pair solemn eyes glared coldly upon the purchaser at the mention of cheapness.

"We will furnish your cottage for you," said one with severity. "When our designs are completed we will let you know. Good-morning."

Alan left the presence of these Parnassian cabinet-makers with humbled heart.

What a lovely cottage they would have made but for circumstances which caused the dispersion of the things they had got together! It would have been divinely beautiful. The windows were to have diamond panes, in *grisaille*, to open on hinges: the rooms, each with a dado, were to be papered and painted in grey and green: Dutch tiles were to adorn the stoves, and the fenders were of brass: no carpets, of course, but matting in wonderful designs: cabinets for the inexpensive blue and white china: chairs in black wood and rush, with tables to correspond.

That cottage, for reasons to be detailed, was never furnished. The two touzly-haired, solemn-eyed prophetesses of domestic art were obliged to content themselves with sending in their bill. This document caused Alan's strong frame to shiver and tremble as shivers the mighty oak under the cold breath that comes before a tempest.

Early in the morning Alan paid a visit to his betrothed. He came bearing gifts. They were plain and substantial things, such as the girl could not be expected to like—books, strong stuff for frocks, everything but what she wanted, a laugh and a kiss, and the promise that she should be a lady.

As for laughing—if the bridegroom was so solemn, what, in Heaven's name, would be the husband?

"Alma," he began, after a frigid touch of the fingers, and in sepulchral tones, "tell me, are you in the least degree distrustful of what you are going to do?"

"Oh! no," she replied, with a little laugh, which jarred upon him. She was thinking, indeed, of something else that she was going to do. "Not at all."

"It is not an easy part that you have undertaken. Sometimes, my poor child, I think it is too heavy a task for you."

"I shall manage it," she said, still thinking of the other task.

"We will at once re-open the Public Laundry, the Public Kitchen, the Public Baths, the Good Liquor Bar, and the Cooperative Store; we will start, on a new plan, the Village Parliament, and we will improve the Library and the Picture Gallery. Next winter we will have the weekly dances begun again, and we will make another attempt at a theatre."

"Yes," she said, with a curious smile, "all that will be very pleasant."

"Your duty," he went on, "will place you always in the company of the wives and girls."

"To be sure," said Alma, "if they like to follow my example, they can." An example, she thought, which would be one not entirely contemplated by her lover.

"We will have," he went on, "a quiet fortnight together by the sea-side, just to mature our plans and formulate our line of action."

"Yes," said Alma, wondering what on earth he meant by formulating a line of action. However, it would not matter.

He gave her, before he went away, a final *résumé* of his theories on social economy, which lasted for two hours. And then, to her great delight, he departed, promising to return in the evening.

I regret to state that as he closed the door, Alma so far retraced her steps in civilisation as to spring to her feet and . . . make a face at him. Quite like a vulgar Sunday-school girl.

Alan was anxious now to have the thing over, and to begin the new life on which he staked so much. As for marriage, he confessed to himself that he was marrying the wrong woman. But the only right woman was Miranda, and she could not be expected to live as Alma was going to live. The thing to do was to drown selfish regrets and inclinations, and to persuade his wife to act her part boldly and hopefully. Would Alma do that?

When he was gone, other visitors came.

First it was Tom Caledon. He had returned from town by the earliest train, and was more than commonly cheerful.

"All is going well, Alma," he said. "Are we quite alone here?"

"Yes; Miss Miranda leaves me here to talk to Mr. Dunlop."

"Then . . . are you quite sure you can keep a secret?"

"Girls," said Alma, with a little toss of her pretty head, "keep their own secrets. It's other people's they tell."

This remark will be found, on investigation, to contain the whole of feminine philosophy.

"Then, my dear child, you look really much too pretty for Harry Cardew——"

"Oh! Mr. Caledon . . . don't."

"I will tell you what you are to do. Get up and be dressed by six. Come downstairs—you will find the back door open for you—at the garden-gate Harry will be waiting for you, and I shall have the cart in the road. You are sure you understand?"

"Quite sure," said Alma, repeating the lesson.

"One of the ladies of the Abbey"—here Tom turned very red—"will be with me. She is going too."

"Not the lady they call Desdemona? I should like her to go."

"No. Not Sister Desdemona. In fact it is . . . it is Miss Despard."

"I know Miss Nelly," said Alma. "I like her better than Miss Miranda. And I've seen her cry once."

What she meant was, that this little touch of human weakness seemed to bring Nelly nearer to herself. The queenly Miranda, she thought, *could* not cry.

"Oh! Mr. Caledon," Alma went on excitedly, "now it is coming I don't know how I feel. And to think of Mr. Dunlop's long face when he hears of it—and father's rage when *he* hears. He! he! he!"

"Yes," said Tom, with a queer smile, "there is plenty to think about. However, you think of your own triumph, Alma. Think of the people gaping when you get down—you and Harry—arm in arm; and when the vicar asks for the bride, and you will say, 'Thank you, Mr. Corrington, you are an hour too late.'"

"And shall we?" Alma asked, with eager eyes and parted lips. "Shall we?"

"To be sure we shall. Good-bye till to-morrow, Alma."

And then her mother came to see her.

"Bostock," she said, with the calmness of despair, "is blind drunk. He was drunk last night off brandy, and he's drunk this afternoon off hot gin-and-water a top of beer. What I shall do with Bostock now you are gone is more than I can tell. Dreadful, he carries on. Says he won't be safe till to-morrow. Cries when the drink's in him. What's the man got to be safe about?"

"I suppose, mother," said Alma the astute, "that he's got into a mess with his accounts. You know father never can keep his accounts the same as other people."

This was a kindly way of putting the fact that Père Bostock, not for the first time, had been cheating.

"And to think, Alma," her mother went on, "to think that you are going to marry the Squire. Where's your wedding-dress, girl?"

"Miss Dalmeny gave it me," said Alma, jumping up. "Come to my bedroom, mother, and see me try it on." She led the way, with a little softening of her eyes as she thought of Harry, and a twinkle as she thought of Mr. Dunlop. "Won't Black Bess be in a rage to-morrow!"

Then there was putting on and discussion of the wedding-dress, which was a present from Miranda. And then, after judicious criticism from the ex-lady's-maid, Alma resumed her morning frock, and Mrs. Bostock, seating herself in the easy chair, while her daughter sat upon the bed, commenced a lecture on the duties of a married woman.

I am very sorry that there is no room for this masterly discourse. It was marked by the solid good sense and by the practical experience which distinguished Mrs. Bostock. The conclusion was as follows:

"As for his notions about living in a cottage and setting an example, and that, don't put up your face against them at the beginning. Say that you are setting an example. Then you sit down and bide. When he's satisfied that no good will come of an example—haven't *I* been setting one for two and twenty years ?—he'll give it up. Only you bide, and you'll live at Weyland Court like a lady. *Like* a lady," she repeated, with dignified sadness, "because a real lady you never can be."

"Nor don't want," said Alma, swinging her feet, as she sat on the edge of the bed, in a manner that went to her mother's heart.

"But you must try, so as not to make people laugh at you."

Here Alma was seized with a fit of irrepressible laughing. It went on so long that it nearly became hysterical.

"I can't help it, mother," she said at last, partially recovering herself, "I can't help it, not if I was in church I couldn't. Lord! how everybody will look to-morrow!"

"Well, they know what to look for."

"Oh! no, they don't," cried Alma, laughing again. And I really do think that if her mother had pressed her, Alma would there and then have disclosed the whole plot, and ruined everything. Because the thing which tickled her was the thought of Alan's solemn face and the consternation of her father.

Then her mother left her, promising to be in good time at the church, and, above all, to see that Bostock did not "take" anything before the ceremony. She herself, she said, had bought a new gown, and her husband a new suit complete, for the occasion. The former she described at length, and was proceeding to describe her husband's coat, when Alma again burst out into an uncontrollable fit of laughing, insomuch that her mother was fain to give her a glass of cold water, undo her stays, and pat her on the back.

At luncheon there was no one but Miranda, before whom the girl was generally afraid to talk, and when she did, talked in bursts and talked too much, as is the way with shy people. But this morning Alma felt a little less afraid. She was conscious that in a very few hours Miss Dalmeny would regard her with changed, perhaps grateful feelings. This made her bold in speech.

"Do you think, Miss Dalmeny, that I am fitter to be a gentleman's wife than I was three weeks ago?"

Miranda hesitated.

"But I know you don't," Alma went on, "and you believe that Mr. Dunlop's gone and made a mistake."

"That depends on yourself, Alma," said Miranda

The bride-elect shook her head.

"No, it all depends on him. He asked me. I didn't want to marry him. And I never did fancy him. As for his caring about me, why he thinks more of your glove than of all me put together."

"But it is too late, Alma, to talk like that," said poor Miranda, with a blush. "You must think of nothing now but your husband's happiness."

Alma tossed her head and laughed. Thinking of Alan's long face on the morrow, she very nearly had another hysterical fit.

In the afternoon Desdemona drove over from the Abbey, ostensibly to see Alma's wedding-dress.

"I know all about it, my dear," murmured Desdemona in her sympathetic way, taking both the girl's hands in her own. "Tom Caledon has told me all about it. You will drive over to Athelston early and be married. And then you will drive back, under Harry Cardew's protection."

"Will you be there to see?" cried Alma, her eyes flashing.

"Surely I will. I always intended to be there to see. Now, my dear, don't oversleep yourself. You are to get up at six and be quite ready."

"I must put on my wedding frock," said Alma eagerly.

"Of course, and here"—Desdemona opened a bundle and took out a long grey cloak—"here is something to put over it. I have thought that perhaps you might be met on your way by people coming from Athelston and recognised. That would not do. So I have brought you a thick veil: mind you wear it in double folds until you are inside the church. And now, my dear, I think there is nothing else that I wanted to say, except"—here she produced a little box in white paper—"except these earrings, which I hope you will wear to be married in, from myself, and this necklace from Miss Despard. And oh! my dear child"—Desdemona's large eyes grew soft, and her voice, oh! so sympathetic—"I do so hope you will be happy, with the real man, the real man, of your own choice."

Alma was left before the glass trying on cloak, hood, necklace, and eardrops. She looked, she thought, too pretty to be a gamekeeper's wife. But that was being a lady, a rich, luxurious, and do-nothing fine lady, compared with living down in the village, doing your own washing, talking unintelligible sermons all the evening, and never, never to be out of the way of that grave face and those solemn searching eyes, always looking for the fruits of wisdom which Alma's little brain could never produce.

In the evening Alan came again, sat with her for two hours, and prosed to so awful an extent that the girl, whose nerves were for the time none of the strongest, had great difficulty in restraining the hereditary temper. It was fortunate that she overcame the temptation to spring to her feet, box her lover's ears and tell him the whole story.

She did not, and was rewarded on his departure by his present of a gold watch and chain. She was so exasperated by his pictures of their coming felicity among the village wash-tubs that she hardly thanked him for it.

Finally, at ten o'clock Alma was able to go to her own room. and make her arrangements for the morning.

These were simple. She laid out her wedding dress, put the trinkets and watch on the table so that she should not forget them, and laid her head upon the pillow in happy anticipation of the morrow.

In the conservatory of the Abbey stood Tom and Nelly. There might have been other pairs in that extensive and beautiful house of flowers, but this couple were apart apparently examining a splendid palm. But they held each other by the hand in a manner quite unbecoming the dignity of botany.

"To-morrow morning, Nelly," murmured Tom, looking more foolish than one would have believed possible in any man.

"To-morrow morning, Tom," murmured Nelly, raising her lustrous eyes to meet his, and looking softly, sweetly, and sympathetically beautiful. Why under these circumstances does man always look like an ass, and woman like an angel? I know of nothing to make a bridegroom assume the expression of a fool, or a bride that of a superior being.

Then Nelly produced a letter.

"See, Tom," she said, her eyes brimming with *malice* and yet her lips a little trembling: "this letter came this morning. And I think that, as Desdemona would say, it looks like improving the situation. Listen.

"'Dear Eleanour'—I suppose you hardy knew, you ignorant Tom, that my real name is Eleanour. Papa always called me Nelly, though—'I can hardly tell you how greatly I have been shocked by a discovery made yesterday evening. I am only astonished that you with your opportunities did not find it out before. I at once wrote a letter to you enjoining immediate return home, but it was then too late for the evening post'—what luck, Tom! 'My discovery was that this Mr. Roger Exton is ACTUALLY a married man. A more heartless case of deliberate deception I have never known. He has been everywhere supposed to be unmarried; he has been taken to meet dozens of girls; he was called the Assam Nabob; he was received with the consideration due to a man who is at once rich and comparatively young and unmarried. Your Aunt Mildred'—she has daughters, too, Tom—'discovered it, and immediately communicated the news to me. He is married to a half-caste, not a Ranee, a Begum, or an Indian person covered with diamonds whom one would be proud to take out in the evening, but of quite common mercantile extraction, probably a Heathen. Wickedness and selfishness of this kind make one despair of human nature. And this very morning, the villain had the effrontery to call upon me. I hope and believe'—think upon this, Tom—'that I behaved as an offended English mother should. I do not *think* he will venture here again. Meantime, through this impostor's arts, you have lost the whole of the summer, and I am afraid got yourself talked about'—I am afraid I shall be, Tom, if I have not already. 'I am, however, going to Hastings, and shall take Weyland Court on my way there. You can be ready to leave that place, which I am very sorry you ever saw, on Saturday. I shall stop at Athelston, and drive over to take you away.' Only just in time, Tom."

"Plenty of time," said Tom.

"Poor mamma! I am sorry for her; and she was so ambitious for me too, Tom. I wonder what she will say. Are you afraid? Papa once said, after he lost money at Newmarket, that there were moments when she was scathing in her wrath."

Last scene of this anxious day.

It is eleven o'clock. Tom has stolen away from the Abbey, and has sought Alan in his cottage.

He found him restless and anxious, pacing the narrow limits of his little room.

"I came—I came," Tom stammered, "to wish you happiness."

"Thank you," said Alan shortly, and continued his promenade.

"I wonder if you feel happy," Tom went on.

"No, I do not," said Alan, more shortly.

"Do you think that you have made a mistake? Alan, perhaps it is not too late even now."

"I cannot discuss it, Tom. Mistake or not, it is made. Too late now for anything."

"I am sorry," said Tom. "And if it were not too late, Alan?"

CHAPTER XLI.

"Go, waken Juliet; go and trim her up:
Make haste: the bridegroom he is come already."

THE first person to rise at Dalmeny Hall on the wedding-morning was the bride. Alma Bostock sprang from her bed, rosy-fingered as Aurora, while the clock was striking five. She had one short hour for the most important toilette she would ever make. She was accustomed to rapidity in these things, however, and it wanted yet a quarter to six when she stood before the cheval glass—of which she will ever after retain a longing memory—complete in all her bridal glories, attired for the greatest event in a woman's life, and ejaculating with a gasp something like Jack Horner, "Oh! what a pretty girl I am!"

Her dress was a pearl-grey muslin costume, a real lady's dress, with trimmings such as she had only heretofore seen in the drapers' shops at Athelston. A few red ribbons, Alma thought, would have improved the dress, but doubtless her mother knew best, and she had decided against them. To be sure, Alma had a fine rosy cheek of her own, and could dispense with more colour. Round her neck was a white lace fichu, real lace, also part of a proper lady's dress. Her bonnet was of white silk, a marvel and a wonder of a bonnet, the like of which Alma had never even dreamed of; her gloves, of pale lavender, had five buttons on each wrist, and each additional button went straight to Alma's heart. She had on the earrings which Desdemona gave her, and the necklace which Miss Despard gave her, and the watch and chain which Mr. Dunlop gave her—the last were superfluous, but Alma could hardly be expected to know that.

So attired, she stood before the glass and cried aloud, "What a pretty girl I am!"

Outside, the morning sunshine of August lay upon the garden and the park, and had already dried up the morning dew; below her window the gardener's boy sharpened his scythe musically, and then began again his low and gentle sh—sh—sh over the lawn; in the woods and coppice behind the garden there was the late song of the blackbird, the carol of the thrush, the melancholy coo of the wood-pigeon: as she opened the window there poured in a breeze laden with all kinds of perfumes from the garden.

These things were habitual to her; she noticed none of them, just as the Oreads and Dryads, the Wood-nymphs, Fountain-nymphs, and Mountain-nymphs, who lived habitually amid the most beautiful scenery, took no notice of it. At least we may suppose so, because they have passed away without so much as a line of poetry to indicate their joy in flowers, leaves, spingtide, and summer.

The gracious influences of the morning air, the recollection of Miranda's kindness, the thought of Alan Dunlop's pain, the knowledge of her father's reliance in their marriage to suit his own purpose, had no weight with Alma. She took no heed of them. She thought only that she loved Harry, who was a real man; that her father's discomfiture would be a sight to see, and Mr. Dunlop's long face most comical and surprising thing to witness; and oh! to get away from that grave face; to be no longer haunted with unintelligible sermons. At any cost she thought, even at the cost of marrying a poor man. But Harry Cardew had money saved, and, as Harry said, they could go to

Canada, buy a piece of land, and farm it for themselves. She would be no poorer than she had been ; and, as for her father's nonsense about his being a gamekeeper, everybody respected Harry far more, she knew very well, than they respected Stephen Bostock.

Alma did not look very far ahead. Had she desired what Chaucer thought women love most--power—she would have taken Alan. For she could have ruled him by a terrible weapon which she possessed, whose force she did not know, her coarse and violent temper. Scenes which to her meant nothing would have been death to him. He would have conceded anything to escape torture of ear and eye, while Alma would be merely enjoying the freedom of her tongue.

But in marrying Harry she was marrying her master. This she knew in some vague way. She feared Mr. Dunlop because he was a gentleman ; she feared Harry—only in this case the fear was not a terrible but a delightful thing—because he was strong, and because he was masterful.

It was six o'clock. Alma took one final lingering gaze of admiration in the glass, huddled on the long cloak, tied the blue veil in many folds over her bonnet *à l'Américaine*, and thus disguised, opened the door cautiously.

Not a soul was stirring in the house. She slid down the stairs as noiselessly as Godiva, stepped cautiously to the garden door, in which, according to promise, she found the key, opened it, and so out into the garden.

Her heart was beating fast now. She was actually carrying her dream of revenge into effect. As she closed the door behind her, it seemed as if she was cutting off the last chance of reconsideration. She thought with a little sinking of the heart of what might have been, Weyland Court, ladyhood, carriages, endless frocks. But then—that grave and solemn man ; and no Weyland Court at all certain, but only misery in a labourer's cottage. She set her lips with determination, and ran down the steps.

On the lawn the under-gardener Robert looked up and grinned surprise.

"Good-morning, Robert," said Alma with great sweetness. "If you see Miss Dalmeny, will you tell her that I have gone to see my mother?"

"I'll tell her," said Robert.

"And you are going to the wedding, Robert?"

He was—everybody was going there : all the world was going, Robert among them.

She laughed lightly, and ran down the garden walk. Outside the little gate she found Harry Cardew waiting for her, and looked up in his face laughing for fun.

Men are so different from women. There was no mirth at all in his face, but a grave sadness, which disappointed her. But he took her in his arms and kissed her through the veil. She noticed, too, that he was smartened up; had on what appeared to be an entirely new suit, in which he did not appear at ease.

"I am sorry," he said—"I'm main sorry for Master Alan. It seems a poor return for all these years, and me to have gone about in the woods with him when we was both boys and all."

"Perhaps," said Alma, "I'd better go back and wait in my room till ten o'clock."

"No," said Harry grimly. "I've got you this time, Master Alan or not; and I'll keep you. Come along, Alma. There's only one who loves you that truly as dare all to have you."

Masterfulness such as this takes a girl's breath away. However, Alma came out that fine morning on purpose to be run away with.

From the garden-gate to the road was a matter of a hundred yards or so. Alma looked back a dozen times, pretending fear of pursuit. Harry marched on disdainful. It would have been a strong band of pursuers to balk him of his bride when he had got so far.

Then they crossed the stile and were in the road.

"Mr. Tom said he'd meet us hereabouts," said Harry, "at six."

It was not the high-road from Weyland to Athelston, but a winding little by-way, once a bridle-road for pack-horses, cattle, and pedestrians, before the days of high-roads and coaches—a by-way arched over and shaded with trees—a way on which there was little chance of meeting any of the Weyland people.

As Harry spoke, Tom came driving along the road.

He was in a dog-cart. Beside him, dressed in simple morning hat and summer jacket, was Miss Despard.

Nelly jumped down and ran to greet Alma, kissing her on both cheeks, to her great wonder.

"My dear child," she cried, "we are both in exactly the same case." What *did* she mean? "Jump up, quick, lest they run after us and catch us. No"—for Alma was about to mount behind—"you sit in the front beside Tom; and, for Heaven's sake, keep your veil down. It would never do for you to be recognised."

This arrangement effected, they drove on, and Alma observed that Mr. Caledon was as grave and subdued as her Harry—a very remarkable circumstance. Tom, indeed, spoke hardly at all during the drive; only he said to Alma once, in jerks:

"I saw Mr. Dunlop last night. Did not tell him what was going to happen. Very good thing we stopped it."

"Father wanted it," said Alma, who was now horribly frightened.

Harry, behind, did not volunteer one single word to Nelly. Probably he was afraid of ladies. Alma was much the more finely dressed of the two, and yet, somehow, he had no fear of her. Fine feathers, he reflected, being a naturalist, make fine birds, but they do not make lady-birds.

It was half-past seven when they drove through the streets of Athelston, clattering over the cobbled stones of the quiet old cathedral town, which was beginning to get itself awakened. But the shops were not open, and only the servants were at the street doors.

Tom drove to the stable-yard of the hotel, and handed over the trap to a boy.

"Now, Harry," he said, "Miss Despard and I are going to do exactly the same thing as you and Alma. Let us make our way to the church."

Not one of the little party spoke as they walked along the empty streets. Both the girls were inclined to cry, and the men looked as if they were marching to battle.

The church was a great solitude: nobody in it but the verger and an old woman, one of those ancient dames who are to be found attached to every church all over the world, who never grow older, and were certainly never young. They pass their days in the church; they regard it as a private place of residence, subject only to periodical invasion from the outside world. Some of them, I dare say, sleep in the church as well.

Alma stopped to untie her veil and throw off her cloak. Then she took Harry's arm and walked after Tom and Nelly as proudly in her splendid dress as if she was under a thousand eyes.

As they reached the altar, a clergyman came out of the vestry, the clerk got within the rails, the verger stood in readiness to give away the bride, and the marriage ritual began.

In Nelly's cheeks was a spot of burning red; her eyes were downcast, and she trembled. Alma's eyes glittered bright and hard; she did not tremble, but she thought of the awful Row that was going to happen; she pictured Alan waiting for her at the altar of Weyland Church, grave and solemn; and she almost began to giggle again, when she ought to have been listening to the words of the service.

"For better, for worse." Their hands were joined, their union consecrated, their marriage actually accomplished.

It was all over, then. Tom and Harry Cardew were now, as the Prayer-Book reminded them at the close of the service, like Peter the Apostle, who was "himself a married man."

They went into the vestry and signed the registers. Thomas Aubrey Caledon, bachelor, and Eleanor Despard, spinster. Harry Cardew, bachelor, and Alma Bostock, spinster. It took ten minutes to get through these formalities, the two brides looking furtively at each other, wondering if it was really true, and feeling the ring upon their fingers.

"Now," said Tom, distributing largesse quite beyond his income to all the minor actors in the drama, "Now, my dear wife"—Nelly started and gasped—"and Alma, as, I suppose, we have none of us had any breakfast, and we have got a good deal to get through this morning, let us go back to the hotel."

Here they presently found a royal breakfast, though I fear scant justice was done to it by the brides. And when Tom poured out the champagne and drank to his wife and to Alma, and when Harry, the shamefaced Harry, raised his glass to his wife and said, "Your health, Alma, my dear, and my true service to you, Mrs. Caledon," Nelly fairly broke down and burst into tears. She was joined by Alma, partly for sympathy and partly because she, too, was agitated by the mingled emotions of joy, terror, and misgiving.

CHAPTER XLII.

"Next morn, betimes, the bride was missing:
The mother screamed, the father chid,
'Where can this idle wench be hid?'"

DESDEMONA, on the fatal morning, invited herself to breakfast at the Hall. When she arrived at nine, Miranda was already in the breakfast-room. Alma, needless to say, had not yet appeared.

"She is naturally a long time dressing."

"Quite naturally," said Desdemona, unblushing.

At a quarter-past nine Miranda went in search of her. There was no Alma in the room at all. Perhaps she was in the garden.

On inquiry, under-gardener Robert deposed that at six o'clock or thereabouts Miss Alma came into the garden and said she was going to her mother.

"It shows very proper feeling," said Miranda.

"It does," said Desdemona. By this time she was quite hardened.

Alan was coming for his bride at ten, and at half-past ten the wedding was to take place There was therefore no time to be lost. Miranda sent a pony-carriage to bring her back immediately. Then Alan came before his time. He was pale and nervous; his look was heavy and grave. Miranda's eyes filled with involuntary tears as she met him.

And then began the wedding-bells, clashing and pealing. They heard them, too, the runaways, driving back to Weyland, on the road just outside Athelston—clang, clash, clang. Joy-bells to greet the brides. Clang, clash—and every bell striking upon Alan's nerves like the hammer of a torturer. Clang, clash. Desdemona shrank into the recess of the oriel window, thinking of what had happened. The bells made her tremble lest the grand *coup* should have failed. Clang, clash—and at the Abbey the Monks of Thelema looked mournfully at each other, to think of such a wilful throwing away of a man, and the Sisters shed tears, and Lord Alwyne rose hastily from the breakfast-table and sought solitude, for his faith in Desdemona was sorely tried.

Clang, clash, clang, and all the village and the people from the country-side, rich and poor, gentle and simple, are gathering in the church and crowding in the churchyard. Among them are Black Bess and that other girl who assisted at the Judgment of Paris, their hearts bursting with jealousy at the great fortune that had befallen her who carried off the golden apple.

The Abbey of Thelema was not without representatives. All the Sisters arrived soon after this, accompanied by some of the Monks. They sent their band, which was stationed on the village green, outside the churchyard, to discourse triumphal music. They provided bunting and Venetian masts to make the village gay. Also, they had erected a vast marquee, in which all the villagers were to be regaled with beef and pies and beer at noon, and again at nine, at the charges of the Abbey. In the evening there were to be fire-works. All was joy save in the village Library, where the librarian, little thin pale-faced Prudence, sat in a corner quiet alone among her books, weeping for the future of her Prophet, the best and noblest of all prophets.

The church was full and the churchyard overflowing and the village green thronged, when, at about twenty minutes past ten, the father of the bride made his appearance. It was the proudest moment of his life. He was accompanied, of course, by Mrs. Bostock. Alma, it was understood, would be brought to the church—a departure from ordinary rule—by the bridegroom and Miss Dalmeny, who would act as bridesmaid. Mr. Caledon, it was also whispered, would be best-man. Harry Cardew, said Black Bess, showed his good sense by staying away. Mrs. Bostock wore her new dress, looking rather ashamed of her prominent position. Her husband, on the other hand, attired in a large brown coat with a fancy waistcoat, the garb, he considered, of the well-to-do farmer, bore himself bravely. He had studied his expression before a looking-glass. It conveyed, though he did not mean all of it, a curious mixture of pride, cunning, humility, and self-satisfaction. He wished his expression to say, as clearly as waggling head, half-closed eye, and projecting chin could speak, "Behold in me, ladies and gentlemen, a man whom merit alone has raised to this dizzy height of greatness."

Then the bells clashed and clanged their loudest: and the band on the village green played in emulation of the bells: and everybody began to look at the clock and to expect the bride.

Half-past ten. The vicar was already in the vestry, attired in his robes: they had made a lane in the churchyard, along which the bridal procession should pass: children were there with baskets full of roses to strew before the feet of the bride.

A quarter to eleven. Why did they not come?

Ten minutes to eleven. There was a sound of wheels outside: the bells suddenly stopped: the band was silent: and then there was a great shout: and everybody stood up: and the vicar came from the vestry and passed within the altar rails.

Well! why did they not come into the church?

The reason was, that although the bride was there, she had not come with the bridegroom, nor in the manner expected.

Another shout, and then the people in the church who were nearest the door began to slip out: they were followed by those nearest to them, and so on, until the church was finally deserted, except by Mr. and Mrs. Bostock and the vicar. Outside there was a great clamour, with laughing and shouting.

"Whatever can have happened, Stephen?" whispered his wife.

"Nothing can't have happened," said her husband, sitting down doggedly.

Then Mrs. Bostock saw Mr. Caledon walking rapidly up the aisle, and she knew that something had happened.

Tom went first to the vicar, to whom he whispered a few words, which had the effect of inducing his reverence to retire immediately to the vestry. Then Tom turned to the Bailiff.

"Whatever has happened, Mr. Caledon?" cried the poor wife, in dire apprehension.

"Nothing, I tell you," interrupted her husband, with a pallid face. "Nothing can't have happened. They've all gone outside to see my beautiful little gell. That's what has happened, You and your happening!"

"Your daughter, Mr. Bostock," said Tom gravely, "is already married!"

Mrs. Bostock knew instantly to whom. Her husband gazed stupidly. He did not comprehend at all.

"She was married this morning at Athelston. I was present. She was married to Harry Cardew, the gamekeeper."

Tom felt pity for the man. He knew—everybody knew—that Bostock was a vulgar cheat who had intended to *exploiter* Alan as much as he could. Yet no one could behold the look of livid despair which fell upon the Bailiff's face without pity. No matter what his deserts were: his sufferings at that moment were too great for him to bear.

It was well that Alma did not witness the despair which she had brought upon her father.

He did not speak: he did not swear: he only sat down and gasped, his eyes staring wide, his mouth open; his red cheeks grew suddenly pale.

"Go away, Mr. Caledon," said his wife gently. "Keep her out of her father's sight. Go away. Don't stay here."

Tom left them.

"Come, Stephen," she said, "let us go out by the vestry and get home."

He only moaned.

"Stephen, come."

He made no reply. She sat beside him, patient, expectant. Half an hour passed. Then he shivered and pulled himself together.

"Ruin," he said, "ruin and disgrace. That's what it means." He wiped his clammy brow, and rose up, his hands shaking as he stood.

"I shall go home."

He marched straight down the aisle, followed by his wife. Outside, the villagers and their friends were all on the green and in the street, talking and laughing. Their laughter was hushed as they made way for the stricken man, who walked heavily leaning on his stick, and the shamefaced woman who walked beside her husband.

When he reached home, he put the pony in his light cart, went into the room which he used as an office, collected all the farm books and placed them in the cart.

"I shall not be home to-night," he said, "but I'll write you a letter."

He drove away, and Mrs. Bostock, left alone and fearful, sat down and cried.

The Bailiff drove to Athelston, visited the bank, and drew out all the money then standing to his name, belonging partly to himself and partly to the farm. He then took the next train to London.

Two letters arrived from him the next day. That addressed to the Squire began with condolences. He pitied, he said, the misfortune which had befallen him, and lamented the wickedness to which he had fallen a victim. As regarded his daughter's husband, he supposed that Mr. Dunlop could do nothing less than instantly deprive the villain of his post and drive him from the estate; and he expressed a fervent hope that the joint career of bride and bridegroom would shortly end in a ditch by death from inanition. For himself he begged a holiday of a month or so, to recruit his shattered nerves. He had taken with him, he went on to say, the farm books, so as not to be idle during this vacation, and in order to present them on his return as accurate as he could wish to see. To his wife he wrote simply that he didn't intend to return for a spell.

He has not yet returned: nor have the books been sent back: nor does any one know why all the money was taken from the bank.

Alma's *coup* was so far a failure, that she did not see her father's face. But it was magnificent to stand on the village green beside her Harry, dressed as she was, with all her fine presents glittering upon her, and to watch in the crowd, as envious as she could wish, Black Bess herself and that other girl. It was great grandeur, too, that beside her stood her sister-bride, the newly-made Mrs. Caledon.

If she had married a gamekeeper, she had jilted a squire: it was done under the protection and wing of one of the ladies of the Abbey: and as no one yet knew that Miss Despard had also that morning "changed her condition," all the sympathy, all the glory, was for herself.

Then Tom came out of the church: they mounted into their places again, and drove away through the Venetian masts and among the waving flags, while the band struck up a wedding march, and all the people shouted and laughed and waved their caps.

This time to Dalmeny Hall.

Alma was again disappointed. Mr. Caledon invited Harry and herself to wait in one of the morning-rooms, while he sought Alan.

He found him with Miranda and Desdemona. They were waiting. Something must have happened, because the bells, which had ceased for a while, had again burst forth in maddening peals.

"Alan," he said, with hesitation—"Alan, I wonder if you will forgive me."

"What is it, Tom?" cried Miranda, springing to her feet. Desdemona only smiled.

"I told you last night, Alan, that I was sorry that you thought it too late to break off your engagement. I am here this morning to tell you that it is too late now for you to marry Alma."

"Why is it too late?" asked Alan.

"Because she is already married," replied Tom. "She was married this morning—I was present—to Harry Cardew."

"My gamekeeper?"

"And her former lover."

"Her former lover? Could not some one have told me?" he asked.

"I could," said Desdemona boldly, "or Tom. But Harry insisted that we should not. We devised, Tom and I between us, this means of rescuing you and the girl from sorrow and misery. No one else knew."

"Yes," said Nelly, who had joined them, "I knew. Tom told me last night."

"Why did not Alma tell me?"

"Because she was afraid of you," said Tom: "because her father was mad to have the match for his own ends: because——"

"Well," said Alan, "never mind the reasons. Where are they?"

"They are in the breakfast-room."

"I should not like to see them," said Alan. "I think it would be better not. Go, Tom, and tell Harry—and Alma too—that had I known the truth, this . . . this confusion would have been avoided. Tell him, too, that I desire he will take a month's holiday away from the place."

"Will you forgive us, Alan?" asked Desdemona.

He looked round him with a strange air of relief. And as he stood there trying to realise what had befallen him, he smiled as a thought struck him.

"It is too ridiculous," he said, taking her proffered hand. "I suppose I ought to be the best laughed-at man in all England. Tom, the people were to have a big feed to-day. Do not let that be stopped. Send word that they are to drink the health of the bride and bridegroom, Alma and Harry Cardew."

"Then we are forgiven?" said Desdemona again.

There was no time for Alan to reply, for the door opened—

"Mrs. Despard and Lord Alwyne Fontaine."

"I rejoice," said Mrs. Despard—she was a tall lady, of resolute figure, Roman nose, long chin, and manly bearing—not the least like Nelly—"I rejoice—kiss me, my dear;" this was to Nelly, who dutifully greeted her parent, and then retired, trembling, to the contiguity of Tom—"that I arrive at a moment when we all ought to rejoice. I have just heard, Mr. Dunlop, that your un-Christian design has been frustrated."

"Yes," said Alan simply.

"How do you do, Miranda?"—Mrs. Despard ignored Desdemona and Tom altogether. "I think, however, that one example in the—so-called—Abbey is enough. I am come to take my daughter away. Are you ready, Eleanour?"

At any other time Nelly would have replied that she was quite ready, even though nothing at all had been packed. Now she fell back, literally, upon Tom, who, with his arm round her waist, stepped to the front.

"Nelly is not ready, Mrs. Despard."

"What, sir!"

"You come a couple of hours too late. We were married this morning, Nelly and I, at eight o'clock, in the parish church of Athelston."

They were all startled, especially Desdemona, who really had known nothing of this.

"Eleanour," cried Mrs. Despard, turning very red, "is this true?"

"Quite true, mamma," said Nelly, trembling.

"You knew of this, Miranda?"

"No, indeed," said Miranda; "this is the first I have heard of it."

Tom looked to be "scathed," like the late lamented Colonel. Nothing of the kind. Mrs. Despard was not equal to an emergency of such magnitude. She only dropped her head for a few moments into her handkerchief, as if she were in church, and then lifting it, mildly remarked:

"I have been much to blame. I might have known that a place with no regular chaperon"—she turned an icy glance upon Desdemona—"where the owner of the house was disgracing himself by an engagement with a milkmaid"—she was warming up, Nelly thought—"where he set the example of living in a smock-frock, on cold boiled pork——"

"No," said Alan, smiling; "I deny the cold boiled pork."

"Where one of the guests—I will not call them Brothers, after the blasphemous fashion of the place—was a married man pretending to be a bachelor; when another was . . . was"—here her eyes met those of Tom, and her language assumed greater elevation—"the penniless and unprincipled adventurer who once before endeavoured to shipwreck my daughter's happiness . . . considering, I say, these things, I have principally myself to blame. Eleanour, when I can forgive you, I will write to you. Lord Alwyne, would you kindly take me to my carriage?"

Well, they were all a little scathed—from Desdemona to Nelly. But Miranda rushed for her, so to speak, and the kissing and the hand-shaking, and the good-wishes went far to dry poor Nelly's tears, and make her look forward with a cheerful hope to the day of forgiveness.

This day was materially accelerated by Lord Alwyne.

"Your attitude, my dear madam," he said, with much show of sympathy, on the stairs, "is entirely what we should have expected of you. Indeed, I would not, if I may advise, be too ready to forgive my dear little friend, your daughter. Disobedience to parents is greatly prevalent among us. Think of my son Alan."

"It is, Lord Alwyne," she said with a sob, "it is; but after all my plans for her success! But you knew her father. She inherits the Colonel's yielding disposition."

"Too true," moaned Lord Alwyne—they were now at the carriage-door. "Meanwhile, my dear madam, I may tell you that Tom Caledon, your son-in-law, has this day conferred a service on the Fontaines which it will be difficult to repay. He has kept the dairymaid out of the family. If there is any one single post left in the country which a minister can give away, and for which there is no competitive examination, I shall ask for that post for him. I write to-day to the Duke, my brother, telling him all."

"Position and income," said Mrs. Despard, visibly softening, "can ill replace a daughter's confidence and trust. You know not, Lord Alwyne, a mother's feelings."

The influence of the head of the House of Fontaine, when the Conservatives are in, is very great. They did say that the appointment of Tom Caledon to that Commissionership was a job. I do not know. As no one ever proposed that I should have the place for myself, I am prepared to believe that Tom is quite as able to discharge the duties as any of the hundred men who wanted it. At all events he is there, and I am sure that the official twelve hundred a year added to his own modest income will go a long way towards reconciling his mother-in-law with her daughter.

There was a beautiful scene in the marquee; Tom Caledon, without Nelly, stood at the head of the table, glass in hand. At his right, Alma, in her wedding-dress; beside her, her husband, shamefaced; behind her, murmuring sympathy and support, Desdemona; all the village at the tables, whereon are the remnants of the pies. Men and women, boys and girls, all are there—the young man they call Will-i-am, old Methuselah Parr, the cobbler, the schoolmaster, Black Bess, and Prudence Driver, looking happy again. In the doorways some of the ladies of the Abbey; the vicar and his daughters; Lord Alwyne and strangers.

"Health !" shouts Tom Caledon ; "health and happiness to Harry Cardew and his wife !"

"Tell me, Miranda," said Alan, when they were left alone, "are you as pleased as the rest with the finish of my engagement ?"

"Yes, Alan," she replied frankly.

"I must not make a mistake a second time," he said ; "Fortune never forgives a second blunder."

"No," said Miranda, smiling, and not immediately seeing the drift of this observation.

"But," he said, holding out both his hands, "there is only one way of preventing that folly. Miranda, will you help me ?"

Who after this could ever say that Miranda was cold, or Alan frigid ?

I should like to explain that Alma, so far, has been a model wife. To be sure she is horribly afraid of her husband, who, now that he has given up gamekeeping and taken Bostock's farm, is more masterful than ever. Her mother lives with her ; and her mother's counsels, seeing that Harry is so steady a husband, make in the direction of obedience. Harry, perhaps, remembers Desdemona's advice.

CHAPTER THE LAST.

"Cras amet qui nunquam amavit,
Quique amavit, cras amet."

THAT evening, while the villagers rejoiced in unlimited beer, and danced after their fashion upon the village green : and while the unwonted rocket brought the flush of rapture to the village beauty's cheek ; while Black Bess, with the other who had missed the apple, consoled themselves with the thought that after all *she*, meaning Alma, had only married a gamekeeper, there was high revelling at the Abbey. Here Desdemona improvised what she called a Farewell Chapter. The nature of the ceremonies which attended a Function of the Order has already been indicated. This, however, surpassed all previous ceremonies. After the opening rites with the organ, Sister Desdemona presented to the Abbess, Brother Lancelot and Sister Rosalind, as two members of the Order about to quit the convent on entering into the holy state of wedlock—a case, she pointed out, already provided for by the Founder. Then Desdemona read in the Great Book of Ritual the following passage :

" 'Wherefore, should the time come when any Brother of the Abbey has a mind to go out of it, he may carry with him one of the Sisters, namely her who has already accepted him as her servant, and they shall be married together. And let all the world know that if they have formerly lived in the Abbey in devotion and amity, still more shall they continue that love in marriage; and they shall love each other to the end of their days as much as on the first day of their wedding.'

"It is in reliance on this rule, my Lady," said Desdemona, ignoring the fact that Tom and Nelly were already, and secretly, married, "that our Brother and our Sister seek the permission of the Order to leave the Abbey."

Miranda, with great dignity, asked if any Brother or Sister had reason to allege why this permission should not be granted.

After an interval, she deputed the Public Orator to speak for her.

Brother Hamlet, who spoke with great hesitation, which was naturally attributed to the *contretemps* of the morning, pronounced the farewell oration prescribed, he said, though no one had ever heard of it before, by the Rules of the Order of Thelema. I can only find room for the peroration:

"Lastly, Brother Lancelot and Sister Rosalind, you have heard the gracious words of our Founder. Go forth from the Abbey with the congratulations and wishes of those to whom you have been indeed brother and sister: may your love continue and grow: forget not ever the Abbey of Thelema: remember in the outer world the teaching of the Order: teach those who come after that to gentlehood and courtesy there is no law but one, "*Fay ce que vouldras.*' Do what honour bids."

He ceased. Sister Desdemona stepped from her desk and solemnly received from the pair, who stood before the Lady Abbess, the hood, the gown, and the crimson cord of the Fraternity. Two of the Sisters, as Nelly resigned these monastic badges, robed her from head to foot in a bridal veil.

Then the band began a low prelude, and the choir sang the Farewell Song:

"You, who have learned and understood
 The master's rules that bind us,
And chosen, as the chiefest good,
 The end that he designed us;
Who hand-in-hand before us stand
 In sober guise not fiction:
Take, ere you part, from heart to heart,
 This Chapter's benediction.

"Think, Brother, whom our Sister chose
 Her servant in devotion,
Love's service never flags but grows
 Deep as the deepest ocean.

To thee we trust her, taught we know,
In this, the Master's College,
Still to obey her lord, while thou
Shalt still thy Queen acknowledge.

"With tears we greet thee, Sister sweet,
Lady of grace and beauty,
To whom love draws by nature's laws,
Whose service is but duty.
Be thine to make the wedded life,
As this our cloister, sunny.
Be mistress still as well as wife,
Be every moon of honey.

"So fond farewells: thy vacant cells
Await a fit successor,
For Rosalind needs must we find
No meaner and no lesser.

"Farewell, farewell: go forth in peace
To sweet and happy living;
Let flowers grow your feet below
Your path be bright with hope and light;
Let sunshine stay beside your way—
Your years one long thanksgiving."

The choir ceased. Then, as the last bars pealed and echoed among the black rafters of the roof, the Public Orator took Nelly by the hand and led her to the throne of the Abbess. Miranda raised the bridal veil, and gave her Sister the farewell kiss. Tears stood in her eyes, and Nelly was crying quite freely and naturally. Each of the Sisters in turn kissed the bride, and the Brothers kissed her hand. Then a similar ceremony—*mutatis mutandis*—was undergone by Tom, Brother Lancelot no longer. Then they waited a moment while a procession formed, and then the organ struck up the wedding march, and the Chapter was finished. First, marched the stewards and clerks of the Order, followed by the choir. Then followed, two by two, the fraternity of Thelema. Then came pages bearing on crimson cushions the gifts of the Monks and Sisters to the bride—the notice was so short that they could give her nothing more than jewels and trinkets, but these made a pretty show. The wedded pair walked next; and last, followed only by the pages who bore her train, came Miranda, led by Alan.

As they passed the bust of the Master, the electric light fell full upon the kindly features and the wise smile, and on his lips seemed to play the words which were written in gold below:

"FAY CE QUE VOULDRAS."

The dinner which followed was graced by as many guests as could be got together at a short notice. Tom sat next to Miranda, beside him his bride; next to her, Lord Alwyne, in great contentment, looking, as he told everybody himself, ten years younger. Alan sat next to Miranda; opposite her, Desdemona. As for Nelly, she had left off crying, and was now, so far from being cast down by the maternal wrath, shyly but radiantly happy. It was a quiet banquet; the band played wedding music selected by Cecilia, the boys sang four-part songs which bore upon love's triumphs; yet all the Brothers looked constrained. There were only two exceptions. Tom, whose honest face betokened gratification of the liveliest kind, and Alan, who was transformed.

Yes; the heavy pained look was gone from his brow; his deep eyes were lit with a new and strange light; his face was wreathed with smiles.

"Daddy Graveairs," said his father, after gazing furtively at him, "is reflecting that he is well rid of the dairymaid. I think we shall not see much more of the smock-frock. Gad! the fellow is only five-and-twenty or so yet. What an age! And what a rollicking youngster he will be at fifty!"

It was Lord Alwyne who proposed the health of the bride and bridegroom. He surpassed himself.

Then came Desdemona's turn. It seemed as if nobody could be so happy as Desdemona looked. Her portly form as well as her comely face seemed, to use a bold figure, wreathed in smiles. In fact, she had a communication to make of such uncommon interest that she might be excused for feeling happy.

She rose, when the time came and begged to be allowed to say something.

She had long felt an inward satisfaction, she said, in marking the rise, progress, and development of those warmer feelings which such an atmosphere as that of the Abbey was certain to generate. In this case she had observed with peculiar gratification that the interests she was watching advanced with a smoothness only possible in the calm retirement of a monastery. Also that there were no discords, no harsh notes to clash with the general harmony; no one was jealous or envious of another; each with each, damoiseau with damoiselle, was free, unhindered, to advance his own suit. "And now," said Desdemona expansively, "these suits have all been advanced, they have all prospered"—here there was a general sensation—"and I am enabled to announce that this Abbey of Thelema will before long cease to exist, because the end proposed by its original Founder has been already attained.

"My friends, Brother Bayard is engaged to Sister Cecilia."

Here there was great cheering.

"Brother Benedict is engaged to Sister Audry."

At each name there was a loud burst of applause.

They were all engaged, every one. And though there was one Sister beside Desdemona for whom there would be no Monk of the Order, in consequence of the expulsion of Brother Peregrine and the defection of Paul Rondelet, yet even that loss, which might have caused a discord, was met by an engagement with one of the outer world. There yet remained, however, Miranda.

"And lastly, dear Sisters and friends," said Desdemona, "before I make my final announcement, let us drop a tear together over the Abbey we have loved so well. The highest happiness, as our Founder thought, is to be bound by no rules but those of gentlehood; to own no obligations but those which spring of culture, good breeding, and sweet dispositions; to do what we will for a space within these walls; to be an example to one another of sympathy, thought for others, and good temper. Alas! my friends, the Abbey is no more. We have held our last Function; we must now dissolve.

"'Brief as the lightning in the collyed night,
And ere a man hath power to say, Behold!
The jaws of darkness do devour it up:
So quick bright things come to conclusion.'

But now for my last announcement. Brother Hamlet, my Brothers and Sisters"—everybody looked at Alan—"is Brother Hamlet no more; that Brother whom we loved, but whose erratic courses we deplored, must have changed his name had the Abbey continued. What name could he have taken but—Brother Ferdinand?"—here Miranda blushed very sweetly. "But he is Alan still, and he has found, O my Sisters, he has found the only woman in the world who is fit to mate with him.

"'For several virtues
Have I liked several women: never any
With so full soul, but some defect in her
Did quarrel with the noblest grace she owned,
And put it to the foil: but she—O she!—
So perfect and so peerless, is created
Of every creature's best—'"

The actress ceased to act; she loved all the Sisters, but she loved Miranda most; her voice broke, and she sat down, burying her face in her hands.

It was at eleven o'clock that they all sallied forth to bid God speed to bride and bridegroom. They were to ride to the quiet place, fifteen miles away, where they were to spend their honey moon. Tom lifts his bride into the saddle, springs into his own, and with a storm of cheers and good wishes, they clatter together down the avenue of the Abbey, two black figures against the bright moonlight, and disappear in the dark shadows of the trees.

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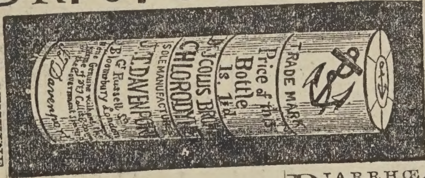

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